



*Reluctant Heroes, Ambivalent Patriots : Eric Ambler, Graham Greene and Middlebrow Leftist Thrillers 1932-1945*

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**Reluctant Heroes, Ambivalent Patriots : Eric Ambler, Graham  
Greene and Middlebrow Leftist Thrillers 1932-1945**

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## Abstract

This study considers how the genre of espionage fiction evolved in the period 1932-1945. It undertakes this consideration by focussing on the espionage fictions of Eric Ambler and Graham Greene in this period, as examples of a genre in a process of rapid change. The thesis shows how the evolving form of these fictions was influenced by their authors' interactions with political questions which at this time were growing ever more urgent.

The thesis is divided into three parts. Part One discusses theories of how genres evolve and then specifically considers how the overall category of the crime story underwent dramatic change in the early twentieth century, leading to a separation between detective fiction and other kinds of crime story, including the espionage novel (Introduction), before further discussing the evolution of the espionage novel specifically by examining the direct ancestors of Ambler and Greene's espionage novels in the 1920s (Chapter 1). Part Two unpacks how the vanguard of literary criticism in this period, represented by the journals *Scrutiny* and *Left Review*, reacted to mass cultural forms such as the espionage novel, as well as discussing how generally progressive theories of society in this period were blind to the potential of mass cultural forms to contribute to progressive change (Chapter 2). Part Three involves separate analyses of the works of Ambler (Chapter 3) and Greene (Chapter 4). Chapter 3, which concentrates on Ambler, looks at how his transformation of the espionage novel was heavily influenced by Popular Front politics and strongly motivated by a primarily anti-fascist aesthetic. Chapter 4, which concentrates on Greene, looks at how his espionage fictions were pre-occupied in self-reflective reconstruction of the very genre they occupied, and how this reconstruction is expressive of a political perspective.

## Introduction

if you excite your audience first, you can put over what you will of horror, suffering, truth.

- Graham Greene, *The Pleasure-Dome: the Collected Film Criticism: 1935-40*<sup>1</sup>

The situation in which a person, imagining fondly that he is in charge of his own destiny, is, in fact, the sport of circumstances beyond his control, is always fascinating.

-Eric Ambler, *The Mask of Dimitrios*<sup>2</sup>

This thesis aims to explore how the early espionage novels of Eric Ambler and Graham Greene, published between 1932 and 1945, demonstrated the potency of popular genre fiction as a politically and socially engaged form, and considers how the specific political constellation of that period impacted on the course of the development of this genre of fiction, as well as how this genre of fiction can help illuminate our understanding of that political constellation. Thus the thesis considers how these novels came into being as a product of a genre undergoing radical evolutionary development, and how they relate to a political context of popular leftism, as embodied in the Popular Front movement of the late 1930s.

The dates covered by this study are overdetermined with historical significance. As Leo Mellor and Glyn Salton-Cox have identified,

There is, perhaps, no period in literary history as pervasively reified as the Thirties. Neatly frozen in time between the Wall Street Crash and the outbreak of World War II, pinned down by over-cited judgements (...) and featuring a well-known cast of authors, styles, and forms<sup>3</sup>

The entire period of the thirties brings with it unavoidable connotations of crisis and disillusion,<sup>4</sup> along with our retrospective knowledge of the conflagration in

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Greene, *The pleasure-dome: the collected film criticism 1935-40*, ed. by John Russell Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Ambler, *The Mask of Dimitrios* (London: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Leo Mellor and Glyn Salton-Cox, 'Introduction', *Critical Quarterly*, 57.3 (2015), 1–9 (p. 1).

<sup>4</sup> The titles of studies of the decade make this clear; Richard J. Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilisation; 1919 - 1939* (London: Penguin Books, 2010); Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000); Francis Claud Cockburn, *The Devil's Decade* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1973).

preparation; a sense of the decade as a prelude. This is not a uniquely retrospective position. In 1934, *Left Review*, an emblematic journal of the decade, declared 'a second world war oppressively near.'<sup>5</sup> Predictions of the imminence of war would continue throughout the decade. In 1937, with war still yet to arrive, Arthur Calder-Marshall, a *Left Review* contributor, and author of a sadly neglected espionage novel,<sup>6</sup> wrote 'To-day the threat of war is always over us. The papers are full of recipes of peace and preparations of war. Militarists, pacifists, and even those who want peace too much to be pacifists are conscious of the possibility and imminence of war.'<sup>7</sup> Indeed, beyond the borders of Great Britain, these predictions were academic; war was a reality. James Klugman has written that 'War hung over the decade like a shadow. The decade was in fact a sequence of wars.'<sup>8</sup>

From a European perspective, 1945 would mark an infinitesimal *caesura* in this sequence of wars, and brings with it an obvious concomitant significance, but in isolation, 1932 is of less obvious resonance. In Geneva, the League of Nations met over a period of months to debate multilateral disarmament. Meanwhile, while the League debated disarmament in Europe, it stood by while Japan occupied Manchuria in the Far East. The conference itself proved similarly ineffective, and no agreement was found. As *New Statesman and Nation* presciently observed, 'Its failure means that Germany will assert her own right to re-arm.'<sup>9</sup> In Germany itself, elections highlighted the huge divisions in the population and laid the groundwork for the seizures of power by Adolf Hitler's Nazi party which were to come in earnest the following year. In Britain, extreme nationalism and a reactionary response to international and domestic crisis led to the Oswald Mosley's ultimately doomed attempts to emulate Hitler and Mussolini with the formation of the British Union of Fascists.

1932 also marked the first green shoots which indicated that the great slump, precipitated by the Great Depression of 1929, was coming to an end.<sup>10</sup> However, this did not mean that economic woes had ceased. Unemployment

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<sup>5</sup> *Left Review* 1 (1934) p. 12

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Way to Santiago* (London: J. Cape, 1940).

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1937), p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Klugman, James, 'Introduction', in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*, ed. by Jon Clark and others (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), pp. 13–36 (p. 16).

<sup>9</sup> 'Issues of the Conference', *New Statesman and Nation*, 30 January 1932, p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *The Slump: Britain in the Great Depression*, 3rd edn (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2010).

stood at 2.8m in July and would not peak until the following year,<sup>11</sup> while the introduction of the Means Test by the National government in the previous year led to the loss of unemployment benefits for many of these unemployed, as well as mass demonstrations against its implementation. In the midst of events such as these, which led *The Spectator* to label 1932 'This Year of Crisis',<sup>12</sup> Jeremiads proliferated. Q.D. Leavis attacked the rise of mass literacy and the fall of minority culture in *Fiction and the Reading Public*,<sup>13</sup> mirrored in the release of the English translation of José Ortega y Gasset's *Revolt of the Masses*,<sup>14</sup> while Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*<sup>15</sup> lamented practically every tendency of modern society. Into this crisis, *Scrutiny*, a new literary journal was launched, announcing that 'the end of Western civilization is in sight' in its first number.<sup>16</sup>

In the realm of espionage fiction, 1932 saw an appearance from Bulldog Drummond in *The Return of Bulldog Drummond*,<sup>17</sup> a new adventure for Colonel Alastair Granby in *Take it Crooked*,<sup>18</sup> and the introduction of Tiger Standish in Sidney Horler's novel of the same name.<sup>19</sup> In addition, as one would expect, amongst the vast outpouring of detective stories of various shades, a selection of spy stories, with virtually indistinguishable titles, were published.<sup>20</sup> However the year was also marked by the publication of one particular novel which marks the boundary of this study, Graham Greene's *Stamboul Train*. This novel marked a new stage in the development of the espionage novel, one which was founded on adherence to the principles indicated in the quotations from Greene and Ambler above. In the hands of these two authors, the espionage novel began in earnest to convey serious themes along with thrills, not least the existential insignificance of the individual in the face of implacable forces beyond their control. In this, Ambler and Greene built on the modifications to the

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Thorpe, *The Longman Companion to Britain in the Era of the Two World Wars, 1914-45* (London: Longman, 1994), p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> 'This Year of Crisis', *The Spectator*, 2 January 1932, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932).

<sup>14</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1932).

<sup>15</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932).

<sup>16</sup> Editorial, 'Scrutiny: A Manifesto', *Scrutiny*, 1.1 (1932), 2-7 (p. 2).

<sup>17</sup> Sapper, *The Return of Bulldog Drummond* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932).

<sup>18</sup> Francis Beeding, *Take it Crooked* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932).

<sup>19</sup> Sydney Horler, *Tiger Standish* (London: John Long, 1932).

<sup>20</sup> An inexhaustive list: *The Riddle of the Straits*, Harry Edmonds, (London: Ward, Lock); *The Bronkhorst Case*, T.C.H. Jacobs, (London: Stanley Paul); *Devil or Man?*, Peter Beare, (London: Herbert Jenkins); *The Enemy Agent*, Sterling MacKinnay (London: John Long); *The "Z" Ray*, Edmund Snell, (London: Skeffington); *The League of Missing Men*, J.M. Walsh, (London: John Hamilton); *One Man's Secret*, Arthur Mills, (London: Collins); *The Cipher Five*, Captain A.O. Pollard, (London: Hutchinson); *The Master Spy*, J.D. Strange, (London: Hodder and Stoughton); *Fifteen Keys*, Carlton Dawe, (London: Ward, Lock); *Eye for an Eye*, Graham Seton, (London: Hutchinson);



form contributed by W. Somerset Maugham and Compton Mackenzie in the late 1920s. Chapter 1 discusses the origins of these modifications by analysing Maugham's novel, *Ashenden: Or the British Agent*, and Mackenzie's pair of novels *The Three Couriers* and *Extremes Meet*, as well as their context as part of an outpouring of works expressing disenchantment with the First World War. This chapter also examines how a more reactionary tradition in the genre, embodied in Sapper's *Bulldog Drummond* novels, continued to be produced and consumed in parallel with the progressive development of the genre. Chapter 2 investigates the approach of *Scrutiny* and *Left Review*, two of the most significant periodicals of this period, to mass culture in general, and to commercial fiction in particular, in order to establish just how unpropitious the literary environment of this time was for politically-engaged genre fiction. Chapter 3 looks at the works of Eric Ambler, with particular reference to his modifications of the generic traditions of heroism, and the position of his works with regards to the attempted leftist populism of the Popular Front movement. Finally, Chapter 4 examines the works of Graham Greene, concentrating especially on the connections between the self-conscious intertextuality of his use of the thriller form and the expression of the impossibility of commitment in the face of complexity.

### The Evolution of Popular Genres

The early decades of the twentieth century saw an explosion in the production of genre fiction, both in the volume of works being produced, and in the variety of active genres. Mass literacy, usually identified as originating from the 1870 Education Act,<sup>21</sup> had led to a new mass audience for literature. As Joseph McAleer notes, 'Overnight – or so it seemed – the masses were literate and demanded copious amounts of reading matter,'<sup>22</sup> generating an appetite for works appropriate to this audience, as John Carey puts it, 'The difference between the nineteenth-century mob and the twentieth-century mass is literacy.'<sup>23</sup> This appetite was primarily for an increase in the production and the ubiquity of the mass market novels labelled as "yellowbacks" and "penny

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<sup>21</sup>Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 2nd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 146.

<sup>22</sup>Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain, 1914-50* (Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 13.

<sup>23</sup>John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880 - 1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 5.

dreadfuls.”<sup>24</sup> Often sold at railway station kiosks, these works were not only appropriate for the mass market in their content, but also in their portability and affordability. These were the novels which drew Matthew Arnold’s ire; the ‘tawdry novels which flare in the bookshelves of our railway stations, and which seem designed, as so much else that is produced for the use of our middle class seems designed, for people with a low standard of life.’<sup>25</sup> As the reading public expanded and diversified, so the publishing industry settled upon the single-volume text as a form which could be produced cheaply enough to cater to a wider and more diverse collection of readers. This production of texts specific to discrete sections of the new mass audience engendered a process of genrefication whereby texts were published with straightforwardly recognisable characteristics which readily identified their belonging to a particular niche.

By this process, the espionage thriller came into being as a genre, itself a subdivision of the thriller, or as Anthony Boucher would later put it, ‘The Suspense Novel: Subdivision X, Espionage.’<sup>26</sup> John Buchan called his espionage novels ‘shockers,’ and acknowledged their parallel with American “dime novels,”<sup>27</sup> while Graham Greene called his ‘entertainments.’<sup>28</sup> The confusion over this terminology was not new in the thirties, as Graves and Hodge have observed, the ‘terms “thriller” and “shocker”, with the semi-literate type of fiction that they covered, had been in use since the Eighties – an early by-product of mass education.’<sup>29</sup> By critics and readers they have variously been labelled, amongst other things, “mystery stories”, “spy stories”, “sensational novels”, “potboilers”, and sometimes simply “thrillers”. Howard Haycraft has observed,

In America, the term “thriller” is usually employed to indicate the sensational crime story, as distinguished from the police novel proper. In England, on the other hand, it has come increasingly to mean the *bona fide* detective story.

<sup>24</sup>For an investigation of the development of popular fiction, see M. J. Birch, ‘The Popular Fiction Industry: Market, Formula, Ideology’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 21.3 (1987), 79–102; Troy J. Bassett and Christina M. Walter, ‘Booksellers and Bestsellers: British Book Sales as Documented by “The Bookman”, 1891-1906’, *Book History*, 4 (2001), 205–36.

<sup>25</sup>Matthew Arnold, “Copyright,” *Fortnightly Review*, no 27, (1880), 28, quoted in Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 190.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Boucher, ‘There’s a Spy Between the Covers’, *New York Times*, 7 June 1964, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> John Buchan, ‘The Thirty-Nine Steps’, in *The Complete Richard Hannay* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 1–104 (p. 2).

<sup>28</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>29</sup>Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), p. 40.

However, in truth there is no evidence that these labels have ever been applied in such a systematic fashion, and the parameters of any individual term, or what separates one term from another, have never been agreed upon.

To some degree, this lack of systemisation is a result of the cultural status of the texts in question. They have largely existed in, and been defined by, vernacular consciousness, with generic identifiers operating within readerships and between readers, writers and publishers rather than between critics or academics acting as systemisers. The terminology has carried sufficient information for its profitable continuation despite its imprecise labelling; these labels are precise enough for bookshops, if not for literary critics. Thus, without recognition of the organic, imperfect nature of existing terminology, imposition of a rigorous categorisation system could be destined for failure or irrelevance. Thus, my goal in the use of genre as an identifier is not in the concrete division and categorisation of texts, but rather in the establishment of a set of fluid, somewhat permeable, boundaries by which it is possible to sketch the limits of an area of study.

Fredric Jameson has formulated genres as 'social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact,'<sup>31</sup> while Alastair Fowler has suggested that genres 'offer room, as one might say, for [the author] to write in - a habitation of mediated definiteness, a proportioned mental space.'<sup>32</sup> These descriptions offer useful metaphorical structures by which we can conceive of genre. In the first instance, Jameson presents the concept as operating within a legalistic framework; a contract, which presents the parties involved with a set of criteria by which they are expected to behave, and which only functions properly when the expectations are mutually comprehensible, as a breach by any involved party would break down the system. In the second, Fowler presents genre spatially; a defined area bounded by mediation which provides the author with a sense of pre-existing limits in which their work is fashioned. In both cases, what genre provides is not a fixed set of values by which a new text is created, or an

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<sup>30</sup>Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1984), p. 257.

<sup>31</sup>Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 92.

<sup>32</sup>Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 32.

existing one analysed, but rather a tradition of practices which can be used in creation or criticism. These are fundamentally matters of the interrelatedness of the varying forces of production and reception, within a network of cultural signification provided by familiar territory, which Alf Louvre has described as 'the result of the interaction between the particular author (or producing group) and the productive means in his or her society, [which] embodies the social relations of production.'<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as Terry Eagleton puts it, the texts produced by this nexus of forces are not directly determined by those forces:

'The form of the ideological content – the categorical structure of the problematic – has a *generally* determining effect on the form of the text, not least in the determination of *genre*. But the form of the text itself is not, of course, identical with its *genre*: it is, rather, a unique production of it.'<sup>34</sup>

Within this context provided by these conceptions, the question of genre with regards to the espionage novel becomes one of its location with regards to other genres within this network of cultural signification. By implication, and in practice, there is a high degree of categorical uncertainty and definitional slippage at work in any attempt to codify and catalogue the membership of any given genre. The haphazard vernacular curation of overlapping generic identifiers means that the boundaries between genres are not cleanly delineated, so while we may begin to locate a text from a superficial question of its subject matter, we rapidly run into complexities which are unaccounted for by such an approach.

The espionage novel is a genre caught between the two generic behemoths of early-twentieth-century popular literature, identified by Colin Watson as 'the tale of detection and the felony-based adventure story or thriller.'<sup>35</sup> In fact, all three, the detective story, the traditional felony-based thriller and the espionage novel, could be simply considered "crime" narratives, belonging to a single shared genre. As readers we may be interested in the ingenious solution to the crime, or enthralled by the adventures of a cunning and elusive criminal, but in formal terms, what this type of story most

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<sup>33</sup>Alf Louvre, 'Notes on a Theory of Genre', in *1936 : The Sociology of Literature. Vol.2 Practices of Literature and Politics*, ed. by Francis Barker (Colchester: University of Essex, 1979), pp. 70–79 (p. 72).

<sup>34</sup>Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 85.

<sup>35</sup>Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence English Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), p. 42.

fundamentally shares is the transgression of legal boundaries as its central subject matter, whether that be murder, kidnapping, blackmail or theft of state secrets. It is clear, however, that if we are to understand and utilise genre in the manners suggested above, such a broad categorical sweep would mask more than it reveals. Neither readerly expectations nor authorial boundaries would be clarified to any practical degree by this; the field of study would be too diverse.

It becomes necessary, then, to identify by what criteria it is possible to separate and identify the working of genre at the level below this, at the level of *subgenre*. Fowler describes this division as a process which 'normally goes by subject matter or motifs (...) it follows that we can carry the division and subdivision of kinds even further by specifying more and more minutely.'<sup>36</sup> In this mode, the identification of genre by subject matter is extended into an identification of subgenre by a process of increasing specification. This specification is a matter of breaking a text into its constituent elements and using them to map its generic location with reference to the presence or absence of those elements in other texts. It follows that the more minutely the elements of a text are specified, the more accurately its generic location can be represented, and it would seem reasonable to assume that this precise locating of a text can produce only a positive outcome. However, there is inherent in this method a somewhat tautological consequence. Once a text's myriad elements are isolated and identified, the constellation of elements produced represents only itself. It may display a recognisable similarity with others, but it is primarily a unique constellation. Rather than establishing a useful terrain for the discussion of groups of texts, this would produce an infinitude of subgenres directly mapped onto an infinitude of texts, in which it would be difficult to see the wood for the trees.

An alternative method of usefully isolating and identifying subgenres is proposed by Franco Moretti, who has conceived of the development of genre as an evolutionary process, visualised as a morphological tree, with divergent branches from a central trunk representing the mutations of subgeneric growths. His method focuses on the presence or absence of a specific device as that which distinguishes the establishment of a new subgenre. In his analysis that device is "clues" in detective fiction of the 1890s, and each branching of the

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<sup>36</sup>Fowler, p. 112.

tree he envisages indicates a further presence or absence related to this single device; the necessity of clues to the solution of the story, the visibility of clues to the reader and the plausible decodability of the clues.<sup>37</sup> In this way, texts are divided into groups defined by a shared significant device rather than individually by the entire spectrum of their devices. From this he is able to trace which branches are successful and spawn further branches, and which are evolutionary dead ends. As he explains, this means that an individual text can belong to a subgenre which is defined by a significant device without being judged by its resemblance to some exemplary text which is taken as the defining work of that subgenre. Functionally, this is a synthesis of the macro-scale generic summary, which risks denying the idiosyncrasies of the individual text in favour of collective definition, with micro-scale textual analysis which risks missing the bigger picture, as Moretti states,

The very small, and the very large; these are the forces that shape literary history. Devices and genres; not texts. Texts are certainly the *real objects* of literature (...) but they are not the right *objects of knowledge* for literary history. Take the concept of genre: usually, literary criticism approaches it in terms of what Ernst Mayr calls “typological thinking”: we choose a ‘representative individual’, and through it define the genre as a whole (...) for typological thinking there is really no gap between the real object and the object of knowledge. But once a genre is visualised as a *tree*, the continuity between the two inevitably disappears: the genre becomes an abstract “diversity spectrum” (Mayr again), whose internal multiplicity no individual text will ever be able to represent.<sup>38</sup>

In his experimental application of this approach, Moretti is seeking to account for the unprecedented popularity of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories when compared with other detective stories in the same publications. His thesis is that in a competitive market of production, i.e. publishing, textual devices which are successful are repurposed by other texts, and subgenres crystallise around the repetition of these devices as tropes, but this process is not teleological. Even the most formulaic or derivative text is never a direct repetition of one that has gone before and will incorporate devices that its successful precursor did not. This experimental randomness leads down many

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<sup>37</sup>Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 73.

<sup>38</sup>Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, p. 77.

blind alleys, as new devices fail, but on the rare occasions when they succeed, the process of crystallisation begins again and a sturdy new branch is established. Furthermore, ascendant forms can overspecialise and wither in the face of changing conditions, whilst dormant or marginalised forms can re-emerge. In addition, such a device-driven understanding of genre would suggest that no genre's ascendancy or demise is inevitable, as these statuses depend as much on the fitness of some narrative device to a particular period as they do on any particular quality demonstrated by texts generated within a genre. As with biological evolution, fitness depends on the environment just as much as the organism.

Moretti's approach to the Sherlock Holmes stories uses the device of "clues", which he considers device of 'exceptional visibility and appeal', while the stories themselves are suitable for this kind of analysis 'because detective stories have the advantage of being a very simple genre.'<sup>39</sup> This rather begs the question of how similarly crucial devices could be identified and interrogated in more formally complex narratives, or whether texts with a greater multiplicity of crucial devices could ever be approached in such a manner. It seems to me that in keeping with the evolutionary metaphor, any attempt to take a snapshot of time and extrapolate either backwards or forwards from it would only be capable of reliable accuracy in hindsight, or as Jameson puts it,

genealogy is not a historical *narrative*, but has the essential function of renewing our perception of the synchronic system as in an x-ray, its diachronic perspectives serving to make perceptible the articulation of the functional elements of a given system in the present.<sup>40</sup>

In closely related texts, it would only be the closer proximity of one than the other to a shifting historical paradigm which would grant one greater significance than another.

#### Defining the Espionage Novel

Tentatively accepting a genealogical formulation of genre, we would locate the espionage novel as a branch on a much greater tree of crime

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<sup>39</sup>Franco Moretti, 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature', *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly*, 61.1 (2000), 207–227 (p. 212).

<sup>40</sup>Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 126. (Jameson's emphasis)

narratives in popular fiction, or perhaps we would see crime narratives as a branch of the popular fiction tree, or popular fiction as a branch of the prose tree. Regardless of the exact structure used, the crucial element would be an understanding that the location of a subgenre on the tree is analogous to its position within a matrix of literary production. Each branch, each subgenre is constituted by its relation to others and by implication, it constitutes those others by their relations to it. In agreement with this position, Tzvetan Todorov has insisted that 'we must understand that a text is not only the product of a pre-existing combinatorial system (constituted by all that is literature *in posse*); it is also a transformation of that system,'<sup>41</sup> while Tony Davies has said 'The structures of popular narratives are in reality *restructurings*, their formulae and recurrent figures continual reformations and refigurings; and it is those processes, which can only be understood historically, that actually constitute a genre and its readership,'<sup>42</sup> Attention to the relations within this literary matrix can grant us an insight into authors' adherence to or deviance from the genre's norms, with the specific nature of these adherences or deviations from those norms further allowing us to see the crucial devices of the novels which render them developmentally important, and as we have seen these adherences or deviations are also how new subgenres emerge and crystallise. In this way, we would come to understand the development of genre not as a progression of static categories, but as a continuum of literary devices in constant dialogue with one another and with literary culture itself.

Expressed in terms of this understanding of genre, the schism in the crime novel which Watson identified as producing the novel of detection as a subgenre distinct from the felony-based thriller was a result of the success of various innovations in narrative devices in detective fiction. There are numerous candidates for which of these devices is most significant in this development, as in its initial stages the novel of detection was formally precise and relatively prescribed. Such was the prominence of the form that it attracted attempts at standardisation such as in the establishment of the Detection Club in London in 1930, an organisation designed to police the detective novel, as well as the

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<sup>41</sup>Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Hughes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 7.

<sup>42</sup>Tony Davies, 'The Divided Gaze: Reflections on the Political Thriller', in *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure*, ed. by Derek Longhurst (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 118–35 (p. 122).



drafting of a series of “rules”, as proposed by Ronald Knox<sup>43</sup>, enshrining its narrative devices as official doctrine.

The schism itself is usually attributed to the time around the outbreak of the First World War, as Haycraft explains:

the War marked, whether fortuitously or not, an effective period to the romantic tradition that stemmed from Baker Street. Before 1914, the difference between detection and mere mystery was clear in the minds of a few. After 1918, we find a new and distinct cleavage, with the tinselled trapping of romanticism relegated for the most part to the sphere of mystery, and a fresher, sharper detective story making bold and rapid strides on its own stout legs.<sup>44</sup>

Prior to the war and the schism, the tale of detection and the felony-based thriller developed from a common ancestry which involved a mixture of elements from the dominant subgenres in the mass fictional genres of crime and the traditional adventure story of the kind produced by Robert Louis Stevenson and Alexandre Dumas. They can also trace a shared lineage back to the Victorian magazine story, as exemplified by the *Sherlock Holmes* stories and E.W. Hornung’s *Raffles* stories. Indeed, prior to the schism, the crime narrative, as a broad genre, existed largely as an unrefined mixture composed of many of the narrative devices which would later be divided through the specialisation of genrefication.

Following the schism, the period between the wars is often referred to as the “golden age” of the tale of detection, during which the publication and consumption of these novels was at its height, but such a characterisation also suggests a kind of prelapsarian generic unity; the same generic unity which Knox and the Detection Club were attempting to impose in what Samantha Walton has labelled this ‘period of rule-writing and self-reflection.’<sup>45</sup> This imposition demonstrates a basic category mistake about the inherently unstable nature of genre on the part of these rigid formalists, and such attempts are thus part of an anachronistic desire to tun back the natural tides of generic evolution, in which the standard account of the culturally static detective story cannot be

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<sup>43</sup> Ronald A. Knox, ‘Detective Story Decalogue’, in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Howard Haycraft (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1992), pp. 194–96.

<sup>44</sup> Haycraft, p. 122.

<sup>45</sup> Samantha Walton, *Guilty but Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 50.

anything other than an idealistic oversimplification. Nevertheless, the label has stuck, and in the formal tropes attributed to the standard tale of detection which survive still, we can see some of the narrative devices which set the tale of detection apart from the felony-based thriller, such as the country house location, the quiet English village *milieu*, a social dynamic involving guests and servants, an “impossible” murder in a locked room, a murky inheritance, a cast of (un)likely suspects, a detached investigator, and so on. A golden age tale of detection involves any or all of these devices, and presents the reader with a, usually linear, journey from mystery to solution. A crime is committed and acts as a rupture in the self-contained world encompassed by the narrative, whether that be a country house or a sleepy village. The role of the detective is to solve the mystery and thus heal the rupture and return the world of the novel to its pre-ruptured state. As Julian Symons described in his history of the crime story,

Crimes were committed by individuals, small holes torn in the fabric of society. The individuals were discovered, the holes mended, by the detectives who represented the force of order, and he did this by a process of reasoning.<sup>46</sup>

This stress on reason and intellect was at the heart of the position which the likes of Knox and the Detection Club attempted to impose, and if we were to select a single device on which to rest fundamental separation of this subgenre of the crime genre from the felony-based thriller, this would be the leading candidate.

As is suggested by Haycraft’s description of the schism as “between detection and mere mystery”, this has generally been considered not only a formal distinction, but also a hierarchical one. There has always been this emphasis on the division between the detective story and “lesser” examples of the crime narrative, as Symons attests:

Historians of the detective story have been insistent that it is a unique literary form, distinct from the crime or mystery story, not to be confused with the police novel, and even more clearly separate from the many varieties of thriller.<sup>47</sup>

In this mode, Dorothy L. Sayers described the thriller subgenre as “purely

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<sup>46</sup> Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 148.

<sup>47</sup> Symons, p. 9.

Sensational', in which, 'thrill is piled on thrill and mystification on mystification: the reader is led from bewilderment to bewilderment till everything is explained in a lump in the last chapter.'<sup>48</sup> This is compared unfavourably with the novel of detection, which allows the possibility of 'an Aristotelian perfection of form.'<sup>49</sup>

This idea of an Aristotelian perfection is shared in "The Guilty Vicarage", W.H. Auden's observations on his own interest in the novel of detection, in which he describes the contrast between the novel of detection and the thriller as both formal and ethical. In formal terms, he defines the novel of detection as one in which 'The basic formula is this: a murder occurs; many are suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murderer is arrested or dies.'<sup>50</sup> This is a definition which excludes 'thrillers, spy stories, stories of master crooks, etc., when the identification of the criminal is subordinate to the defeat of his criminal designs.'<sup>51</sup> In ethical terms, he describes the novel of detection as fundamentally disinterested in macro-scale ethical considerations, with a focus instead on the criminal culpability of the individual, again in contrast with the thriller:

The interest in the thriller is the ethical and eristic conflict between good and evil, between Us and Them. The interest in the study of a murderer is the observation, by the innocent many, of the sufferings of the guilty one. The interest in the detective story is the dialectic of innocence and guilt.<sup>52</sup>

Auden passes off his interest in the detective novel within the typical frame of the "guilty pleasure", describing it as an 'addiction', whilst also stressing quite plainly that it is a rather superior form of addiction, stating that 'The typical detective story addict is a doctor or clergyman or scientist or artist, *i.e.*, a fairly successful professional man with intellectual interests and well-read in his own field.'<sup>53</sup> Again, this is in contrast with the thriller, which he speculates may be read 'by respectable law-abiding citizens in order to gratify in phantasy the violent or murderous wishes they dare not, or are ashamed to, translate into action.'<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Omnibus of Crime", in Haycraft, Howard, *The Art of The Mystery Story*, p83

<sup>49</sup>Sayers, p101

<sup>50</sup>W. H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1948, pp. 406–12 (p. 406).

<sup>51</sup>Auden, p. 406.

<sup>52</sup>Auden, p. 406.

<sup>53</sup>Auden, p. 411.

<sup>54</sup>Auden, p. 411.

The hierarchical element of this distinction is key element in the definition of these narratives. The tale of detection has been considered a cerebral pursuit and despite being a phenomenon of mass publishing, has been, and continues to be, the subject of scholarly attention; such was its status that Q.D. Leavis labelled it a 'highbrow cult'.<sup>55</sup> As such a label implies, these forms were heavily involved in the ongoing debate over the cultural (as opposed to economic) stratification which played out in the early twentieth century. "Lowbrow", "middlebrow" and "highbrow" emerged as categories in the early twentieth century, separating mass, low, culture from elite, high, culture and generating a liminal middle category for that which did not fit this stark division. By its nature, the middlebrow is less clearly defined than the poles between which it sits, and thus defined by negation. As Melissa Schaub observes, 'To be middlebrow is to be more than simply a bit more serious than other popular novels,'<sup>56</sup> and it has been further characterised by Clive E. Hill as 'a catch-all term that usually refers to a style of writing that was neither unapologetically elitist, nor intractably vulgar,'<sup>57</sup> while Pawling and Baxendale describe the middlebrow as a retrenchment of adherence to nineteenth century cultural touchstones:

In the audiences who - unable to stomach Stravinsky - remained loyal to nineteenth century romanticism; and in the readers who, finding Joyce, Woolf and Lawrence hard to take, sought the continuance of nineteenth-century realism.<sup>58</sup>

However, adherence to this legacy is not the whole story. In the inter-war period, the middlebrow was also involved the proactive formation of entirely new kinds of writing, as Nicola Humble notes, 'It was becoming clear throughout the 1920s that a new sort of reading public had emerged: the expanded suburban middle class, more affluent, newly leisured, and with an increasingly sophisticated taste in narratives.'<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, according to Graves and Hodge,

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<sup>55</sup>Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 200. For further discussion of Leavis and the "brow" question, see Chapter 2.

<sup>56</sup> Melissa Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction: The Female Gentleman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Clive E. Hill, 'The Evolution of the Masculine Middlebrow: Gissing, Bennett and Priestley', in *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr. Miniver Read*, ed. by Kate Macdonald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 38-55 (p. 38).

<sup>58</sup> John Baxendale and Christopher Pawling, *Narrating the Thirties: A Decade in the Making, 1930 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996), p. 49.

<sup>59</sup> Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 10.

this process extended even to the lowbrow: 'As the twenties lapsed into the thirties (...) the low-brow public in Great Britain gradually grew up. The sharpening of its critical sense by slicker cinema-pictures sharpened its literary judgement too.'<sup>60</sup> These processes of sophistication were exemplified by the detective story, which thus participated in the characteristic middlebrow process of destabilising cultural boundaries. Alison Light has observed that the genre 'was one place within the more popular literatures that "middlebrow" and "highbrow" could meet,'<sup>61</sup> and at this point of meeting, the destabilisation occurred. The detective novel could be simultaneously both a "highbrow cult", as Leavis described, and a thoroughly middlebrow form, with its ambiguous position undermining the very notion of stratification, and working to dissolve the gap between middlebrow and highbrow, the 'new boundary of cultural discrimination, which divided the general educated audience from the high intelligentsia.'<sup>62</sup>

While the detective novel occupied this middlebrow position, both signifying change and enacting it, the "purely sensational" thriller, in the hierarchical distinction between the two forms, remained associated with the lowbrow; disposable and without even the allusiveness or intellectual complexity of its sibling form: "intractably vulgar." This, however, was an oversimplification of the situation. In a discussion of Francis Beeding's spy fictions, LeRoy Panek notes that he 'has the flippant tone, the sense of the absurd, the self consciousness about what he does, and the impulse to quote which mark writers like Wodehouse, Allingham, Sayers or Marsh.'<sup>63</sup> As one would expect, as these forms developed in dialogue with one another, so authors such as Beeding attempted a translation of the allusive middlebrow detective novel to the sensational form in pursuit of what Panek describes as 'cultivated people.'<sup>64</sup> However, this was a reductive method with which to directly mimic the tastes of one audience in another form, rather than an entirely fresh negotiation of the boundaries between strata. With the Ambler-Greene story, we see an entirely more innovative negotiation of those boundaries. This thesis approaches these

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<sup>60</sup> Graves and Hodge, p. 42.

<sup>61</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 162.

<sup>62</sup> Baxendale and Pawling, p. 49.

<sup>63</sup> LeRoy Panek, *The Special Branch: The British Spy Novel, 1890-1980* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p. 84.

<sup>64</sup> Panek, p. 85.

novels as a participants in a middlebrow form which does not seek to cast off the inherited vulgarity of the sensational form, but rather mobilizes it in combination with what Michael Denning has described as 'moral and literary seriousness,'<sup>65</sup> resulting in a uniquely vital synthesis of excitement with "horror, suffering, truth."

### The Pre-History of the Ambler-Greene Story

In large part, in the "purely sensational", lowbrow, thriller which emerged in the split from the novel of detection, the most popular authors representative of the subgenre continued in much the same vein after the division occurred as they had before the First World War. This is embodied in the works of authors such as William Le Queux, Edgar Wallace and E. Phillips Oppenheim. These writers were prolific, producing over 100 novels each during their careers, and were supported by a loyal and devoted public who consumed their output voraciously. It is estimated that in 1933, 'of every four books being read in Britain one was an Edgar Wallace.'<sup>66</sup> Unsurprisingly, given this prolific output, their works are generally formulaic, repetitive and unimaginative. Indeed, Panek asserts that Le Queux's 'plotting is execrable, his characters are buffoons, and his style is tedious to the extreme,'<sup>67</sup> whilst Oppenheim's works 'are bad novels, bad technically, stylistically, and bad morally.'<sup>68</sup> As a result a great majority of even the most popular thrillers from the early twentieth century have fallen from public consciousness to a much greater degree than novels of detection from the same period. Even at the time of their publication, there was an awareness of the disposable nature of the genre which was not, to the same extent, the case with the novel of detection, and they never attracted the scholarly or literary attention of critics. Even in the rare examples of defence of the sensational thriller, their disposable nature is acknowledged. G.K. Chesterton, for example, asserts that 'To despise such stories is of all things the most despicable. It is like despising pantomimes or public-houses or comic songs or common enjoyments of every kind that bind us into the brotherhood of man,'<sup>69</sup> but maintains that 'pelted the world with a prodigious number of quite readable

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<sup>65</sup> Michael Denning, *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 61.

<sup>66</sup> Watson, p. 83.

<sup>67</sup> Panek, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> Panek, p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Come to Think of It: A Book of Essays* (London: Methuen, 1930), p. 74.

sensational romances does not matter; and most probably is not meant to matter.<sup>70</sup>

In addition to these authors who continued to produce thrillers both before and after the division, other authors emerge after the First World War whose works are more recognisably distinguished from what came before. The adventure stories of Dornford Yates, Sapper's *Bulldog Drummond* series, Leslie Charteris' *Saint* series and Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* series could all be included in this group. We also see detective novelists crossing the divide to produce sensational thrillers of their own, a phenomenon which increases as the Second World War draws nearer, but which is certainly evident earlier than that, such as in Agatha Christie's *The Secret Adversary*,<sup>71</sup> which was published in 1922.

The espionage novel, then, emerges as an offshoot of the “sensational” thriller. In fact, the clear dualism of the pure novel of detection and the pure thriller is one which could only be claimed for the briefest moment of generic clarity. The pre-war crime narrative exhibits, more typically, characteristics of what Moretti has described as symptomatic of genre in the transitional mode:

in times of morphological change, like the 1890s for detective fiction, the individual writer behaves exactly like the genre as a whole: *tentatively*. During a paradigm shift no one knows what will work and what won't.<sup>72</sup>

Moretti's example is of detective fiction in the 1890s, but it can be expanded to cover the crime novel more generally, and the espionage novel specifically. This period produces espionage narratives which display evidence of a tentative movement towards the identifiable form which is adopted by Ambler and Greene, and which vary wildly whilst broadly sharing this generic territory.

In the first place is Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands*, often cited as the first modern espionage novel, and which in 1903 happened upon many of the devices which would become standard decades later in the espionage novel as the genre developed, continuing through to Ambler and Greene. Firstly, for example, the novel's protagonist, Carruthers, is a bored gentleman looking for distraction, and his acceptance of a seemingly innocuous invitation from his

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<sup>70</sup>Chesterton, *Come to Think of It: A Book of Essays*, p. 75.

<sup>71</sup>Agatha Christie, *The Secret Adversary*. (London: John Lane, 1922).

<sup>72</sup>Moretti, 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature', p. 215. (Moretti's emphasis)

old friend Davies unwittingly involves him in an adventure of intrigue and temporarily converting him into the role of amateur secret agent. Secondly, Childers' insistence on elaborate and unnecessary detail of the sailors' travails on the *Dulcibella*, as well as the inclusion of maps alongside the text provides a sense of authenticity, which renders *The Riddle of the Sands* distinct from its more fantastical contemporaries. We are also made aware of the adventure's occurrence outside the realms of the usual protection of the law and of society, in this case due to the isolated nature of seafaring. In addition, it is made clear that the safety of England and the personal safety of Carruthers and Davies are intimately entwined; the sailors' are in a unique and privileged position to prevent the German invasion plot and are conveniently prevented by the narrative from involving higher authorities with greater resources in their investigations. These are just some of the devices which are uncommon in this period but become standard as the espionage novel is established, and undoubtedly others could be identified.

In this same period we find espionage narratives amongst Oppenheim and Le Queux's jumble of works 'which combine crime, puzzle, espionage, romance and veneration of the high-life.'<sup>73</sup> These are socially conservative novels which nevertheless allow glimpses of the influence of modernity on their content. In Oppenheim's *The Mysterious Mr Sabin*, for example, it is acknowledged that the figure of the modern spy is a significant one, in which an individual can change the fate of a nation with 'a simple roll of papers and a small parcel,'<sup>74</sup> even as Wolfenden, the nominal hero of the novel protests that in England 'we scarcely know the meaning of the word "intrigue" here. We are the most matter-of-fact and perhaps the most commonplace nation in the world.'<sup>75</sup> However, within the same narrative, as much attention is paid to Wolfenden's romantic involvement with a mysterious and beautiful girl who, it transpires, is a French princess, and herself an instrument in a plot to restore the French monarchy. Melodrama and intrigue are both present, and whilst their combination proved immensely popular in its time, their superficial union has since lost its appeal in the face of genuinely modern texts.

This is also the period in which G.K. Chesterton's hallucinatory wild

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<sup>73</sup>Panek, p. 50.

<sup>74</sup>E. Phillips Oppenheim, *Mysterious Mr. Sabin* (London: Ward, Lock & Co., Limited, 1898), p. 136.

<sup>75</sup>Oppenheim, *Mysterious Mr. Sabin*, p. 72.



goose chase *The Man Who Was Thursday*<sup>76</sup> and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* were published. These can be considered works which are more self-consciously in dialogue with the process of generic development, appropriating the narrative devices from the thriller in a broadly parodic mode. *The Man Who Was Thursday* contains elements such as the desperate cross-country manhunt and "Sunday", the mysterious and seemingly omnipotent criminal mastermind which are recognisably generic in form, but its ultimate revelation that the entire shadowy Council of Anarchists is entirely composed of detectives tasked with spying on the Council, and its dreamlike denouement which reveals the true nature of Sunday, are absurdist rather than wholeheartedly sinister. Similarly in *The Secret Agent*, the seedy, quotidian, urban setting both emphasises and undermines the sinister nature of Verloc's plot, which then fails as his mentally ill brother-in-law who he has manipulated into carrying out the plot succeeds only in blowing up himself.

The espionage novel which emerged from these varied sources crystallised as a distinct genre contemporaneously with the split of the detective novel from the thriller, establishing the world of the spy thriller, which Jon Thompson has described as 'necessarily, always a vulnerable one, a world in which the satisfactory resolution of one conspiracy or threat does not ever finally establish the safety of the collective, whether it be a company, an intelligence agency, or a nation.'<sup>77</sup> The context of the First World War saw the publication and success of John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, which, as his biographer notes, 'Up to 1915 Buchan had not sold more than 2000 copies of any of his novels or books of short stories,' by comparison, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* 'sold 25,000 copies by the end of the year, and 34,000 during 1916.'<sup>78</sup> This was not the first of Buchan's works which could be considered a thriller, but was the first to find such dramatic success, which hints that the text is possessed of a novel narrative device which renders it singularly attractive to its audience, or as Moretti has described it, 'A device designed to colonize a market niche, forcing other writers to accept it or disappear.'<sup>79</sup> We can also confirm from our vantage point, a century later, that as things stand, *The Thirty-*

<sup>76</sup>G. K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday* (London: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1908).

<sup>77</sup>Jon Thompson, *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 105.

<sup>78</sup>Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 293.

<sup>79</sup>Moretti, 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature', p. 215.

*Nine Steps* has undergone the process of canonization whereby it is held as an exemplar; 'not the extent of a book's initial popularity but its steady survival from one generation to the next,'<sup>80</sup> which is a process this thesis both contributes to and is at the mercy of. In keeping with our attempt to understand genre as a process defined by the rise and fall of narrative devices, this is not to elevate Buchan's novel to a position as a 'representative individual' of the espionage novel, but rather to acknowledge that it displays with great clarity a number of the devices by which the espionage novel is recognised.

In outline, the narrative devices present in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* are not dissimilar from those identified above in *The Riddle of the Sands*. The novel's protagonist, Hannay, is a bored gentleman whose innocuous offer of help to a neighbour involves him in an adventure of intrigue and temporarily converts him into the role of amateur secret agent. Buchan sprinkles the text with bouts of extraneous detail, especially of Hannay's amateur spycraft, which contributes to a sense of authenticity. From the very beginning of the plot, it is contrived in such a way that not only can Hannay not seek the aid of the police, but is actually on the run from the law as a murder suspect. Finally, due to the nature of the revelation passed to Hannay in the beginning of the novel it is made clear that his personal safety and the defence of the realm are intimately entwined; he is in a unique and privileged position to prevent the German invasion plot, and it is made clear that involving higher authorities would be disastrous.

As we have seen, all of these devices have remarkably close counterparts in *The Riddle of the Sands*, which begs the question of what then sets *The Thirty-Nine Steps* apart as a crystallised example of a newly defined form from the experimentally tentative espionage novels that had gone before. The defining characteristic of Ambler-Greene novel, as mentioned above, is its moral and literary seriousness, and this characteristic is not present in Buchan. *The Thirty-Nine Steps* operates instead within the tradition of "Clubland" heroes; defiantly upper-middle class gentlemen amateurs, and while Hannay is in close proximity with a more "authentic" vision of the world than is often present in such works, he is also involved in narratives involving miraculous disguise and is the recurrent beneficiary of a directed divine providence which rewards his endeavours with positive coincidences. As such, these are demonstrably not

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<sup>80</sup>Moretti, 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature', p. 215.

novels which take place in the “serious” world occupied by Ambler and Greene's novels, rather they take place in a world in which implausibility is expected.

If we are seeking “serious” narratives in the pre-schism espionage novel, it lies instead in the parodic worlds imagined by Conrad and Chesterton. These novels are possessed of a literary seriousness in their engagement with their own status as generic fictions, but more powerfully, they are serious in their vision of evil and its consequences. Childers, Oppenheim, Buchan and Le Queux's villains are generally foreigners; often Germans, but not exclusively, and usually gentlemen. These are figures of equivalent status to the heroes of these novels but who simply happen to be foreign. They are entirely comprehensible; their motives rational and reasonable. At the conclusion of *The Riddle of The Sands*, Carruthers reflects on his adversary, ‘I often return to the same debate, and, by I know not what illogical paths, always arrive at the same conclusion, that I liked him and like him still.’<sup>81</sup> This is not true of Conrad and Chesterton's villains. These are “anarchists”, a poorly clarified term in the period, which is a depository for unspecified anxieties, without affiliation to a country and motivated by pure ideology. In *The Secret Agent*, this is described as a value system which justifies destruction: ‘The Professor's indignation found in itself a final cause that absolved him from the sin of turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition. To destroy public faith in legality was the imperfect formula of his pedantic fanaticism.’<sup>82</sup> These are not “gentlemen” and the likes of Carruthers would find their fanaticism incomprehensible.

In *The Power House*,<sup>83</sup> Buchan's early thriller, the villain is plainly of the Conrad/Chesterton type; he is a fanatic and leader of a powerful anarchist organisation, and so by how close his conspiracy comes to success, is able to teach the hero of that novel ‘how thin is the protection of civilisation.’<sup>84</sup> *The Thirty-Nine Steps*' villain, on the other hand, is a German agent. In the midst of an actual war ongoing, Buchan's patriotism wouldn't countenance anything else. However, he is not the gentleman or a Hannay-equivalent that we find in novels discussed earlier. He is most often described quasi-mystically as ‘an old man with young eyes who could hood his eyes like a hawk,’<sup>85</sup> and it is his eyes

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<sup>81</sup> Erskine Childers, *The Riddle of the Sands* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), p. 262.

<sup>82</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (London: Vintage Classic, 2007), p. 74.

<sup>83</sup> J. Buchan, *The Power-House* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1916).

<sup>84</sup> John Buchan, *The Power-House* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2007), p. 88.

<sup>85</sup> John Buchan, ‘The Thirty-Nine Steps’, p. 14.

which give away his dangerous ideological fanaticism: 'A white fanatic heat burned in them, and I realized for the first time what a terrible thing I had been up against. This man was more than a spy; in his foul way he had been a patriot.'<sup>86</sup> This is not the reasonable patriotism of a thoroughly sound chap who just happens to be German and on another day would be a jolly companion at Hannay's club; this is the ideologically powered patriotism of a fanatic. And it is this, I would argue, with its foreshadowing of the fascist threat to come, which separates Buchan's work from what came before; an awareness, however shallow, of the danger that would come with the transfiguration of international political disputes to the status of holy wars, which is itself a literal plot in *Greenmantle*, the next of Buchan's espionage novels.

In their recognition of the ideologically fanatical nature of threat, and of the all-pervasive strangeness and danger which results from this threat being concealed in familiar, everyday surroundings, Buchan's novels establish the characteristic mode of modern espionage fiction. It is this which causes Graham Greene to note that 'John Buchan was the first to realise the enormous dramatic value of adventure in familiar surroundings happening to unadventurous men [and he showed] that death may come to any of us (...) by the railings of the park or the doorway of the mews.'<sup>87</sup> The ordinary man facing the implacable evil of fanaticism could perhaps then be identified as the narrative device which colonises a new market niche for the espionage novel, and provides the through line connecting Buchan's prototype with the more serious espionage fictions which were to follow. Indeed, it is the connection between fanaticism and its corollary, irrationality, which generates the fundamental kernel of the genre, which Jon Thompson has expressed; 'Often regarded as paranoid in structure, espionage fiction is directly concerned with whether the real is knowable.'<sup>88</sup> Somewhere between *The Man who Was Thursday* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps* this paranoid structure acquired its characteristic mode, 'absurdity, tinged with menace',<sup>89</sup> which Christopher Pawling has attributed primarily to Kafka, but which is equally expressed in this mass cultural form which routinely takes fundamentally uncanny epistemological concerns as its page-turning material.

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<sup>86</sup> John Buchan, 'The Thirty-Nine Steps', p. 103.

<sup>87</sup> Graham Greene, *Collected Essays*, New edn (London: Vintage Classics, 1999), pp. 167–68.

<sup>88</sup> Jon Thompson, p. 152.

<sup>89</sup> Christopher Pawling, *Christopher Caudwell: Towards a Dialectical Theory of Literature*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 12.

**Chapter 1:**  
**'a little mild mental recreation from the stern realities of**  
**war' : Disenchantment and Transformation in the**  
**Espionage Fictions of Sapper, Somerset Maugham and**  
**Compton Mackenzie**

A good agent tells you that a lack of coffee and contraceptives among the Turks will make them sue for peace in less than a month. The fighting arms, fat boy, are always thirsting for an intellectual tonic. That is what the secret service is intended to provide. That, and a little mild mental recreation from the stern realities of war.

- Compton Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p.23

Introduction

Some analyses of the spy novel have made a point of attempting to justify their attention to it by tracing its tradition to antiquity, or more precisely, to the classics. John G. Cawelti and Bruce Rosenberg, in *The Spy Story*, begin their account with reference to the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the old testament. However, this desperate seeking for validation is not necessary; we do not need to find noble precursors to the genre to legitimise our study of it now. As Eric Ambler notes in his introduction to *To Catch a Spy*, 'it is impossible to find any spy story of note written before the twentieth century.'<sup>1</sup> As we have seen, the modern form of the espionage novel began to take form in the first decade of the twentieth century, but the First World War marked a decisive intervention in its development. This chapter begins by examining how, despite academic consensus to the contrary, popular culture began to memorialise and thus re-narrate the war immediately following its end, and how Sapper's *Bulldog Drummond* series can be viewed as an example of these acts of popular memory. These novels are then contrasted with the espionage fictions of Somerset Maugham and Compton Mackenzie, which are closer to the academic consensus of a general expression of disenchantment with the war, and which also indicate the evolutionary development of the genre which would lead to the Ambler-Greene story in the following decade.

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<sup>1</sup>Eric Ambler, *To Catch a Spy. An Anthology of Favourite Spy Stories* (London: Bodley Head, 1964), p. 7.

The First World War brought about the crystallisation of the espionage novel as a distinct subgenre of popular fiction, and though the reasons for this were of course numerous, the imposition of the conflict itself on everyday life was perhaps the central one. Speculative pre-war espionage narratives had been informed by almost a century of nearly unbroken peace between Britain and other major European powers, and as such these stories of invasion had tended towards the exotic and implausible.<sup>2</sup> As a collective whole, invasion literature had cumulatively proposed practically every nation under the sun as possible legitimate threats to Great Britain and was thus, in large part, proved wildly inaccurate in its proposals. Whilst some examples had indeed placed Germany most prominently amongst these threats, even these did not emerge entirely vindicated. As it transpired, even the most plausible narratives of possible invasion did not come to pass. Aside from the Zeppelin bombing raids which, though damaging, were not on a grand enough scale to act as genuine outriders of an invading army, stalemate on the battlefields of the Western Front and the retreat of the German fleet after the Battle of Jutland had ensured that German forces posed no direct physical threat to the British Isles' integrity. There was to be no invasion.

Nevertheless despite the failure of any foreign power to breach the frontiers of the islands, the traumatic impact of the first world war on British culture and society was profound. In addition to the Zeppelin raids, the U-Boat campaign conducted by the German navy meant that the impact of war was felt not only on combatants, but also on the home front by the civilian population. This impact was combined with the demoralising effect of the protracted conflict occurring with loss of life on an unprecedented scale on the fields of France and Belgium, the Middle East, and many corners of the Empire. While many of the invasion narratives had forecast decisive and humiliating defeats, though often overturned by equally swift and decisive reversals of fortune once the natural martial prowess of the everyday Englishman was unshackled, they had not predicted the possibility of a slow, muddled and demoralising victory such as actually occurred. For whilst the country and the Empire emerged victorious,

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<sup>2</sup> For accounts of these fantastical pre-war fictions, see I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War, 1763-1984* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966); I. F. Clarke, *The Great War with Germany, 1890-1914: Fictions and Fantasies of the War-to-Come* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997).

and an apparent post-war boom seemed to herald the new age of prosperity that was hoped for, this boom proved illusory almost immediately. As A.J.P. Taylor notes, the primary manufacturing sector collapsed and 'Unemployment more than doubled between December 1920 and March 1921,' which meant that Prime Minister David Lloyd George's promise to make 'a country fit for heroes to live in' 'seemed a mockery.'<sup>3</sup> The twenties were not to be an idyllic decade of post-war peace and prosperity as was hoped for. Instead they were to be marked by labour unrest, peaking in the general strike of 1926, economic uncertainty prefacing the Great Depression and the first stirrings of the extreme politics which would come to define the following decade and the war to come. As Samuel Hynes has described it, 'To many Englishmen, post-war England seemed to exist as a sort of negative sum - the sum of all those losses, and of the war's ruins.'<sup>4</sup>

### The "Myth of the War" and Popular Culture

It has been widely asserted that the context of this "negative sum"; the re-imposition of harsh economic reality on the British population, combined with the trauma of the loss of a generation, led to a society uninterested in remembering the war in its immediate aftermath. This is taken as an explanation for the apparent suspension of publications related to the conflict in the twenties, a state of affairs which led Herbert Read to reflect that, looking back on the period, 'Between 1918 and 1928 it was almost impossible to publish anything realistic about war.'<sup>5</sup> Impossible, that was, until the tremendous success of the publication and translation of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928), a German novel which expressed and reflected upon an overpowering regret for the senselessness of the war and the loss of life involved. Following this, a sudden and overwhelming outpouring of an anti-war bloc of literary works were published to great acclaim, recounting the experiences of British soldiers, such as Ford Madox Ford, *Last Post* (1928); R.C. Sherriff, *Journey's End* (1928); Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928); Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (1929); Robert Graves, *Good-Bye to all That* (1929); Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (1930) and

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<sup>3</sup>A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 146.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 311.

<sup>5</sup>Herbert Read, 'The Failure of the War Books', in *A Coat of Many Colours: Occasional Essays* (Routledge, 2015), pp. 73-74 (p. 73).

Frederic Manning, *Her Privates, We* (1930). This canon of like-minded works has since been posited as the origin of what Hynes has called 'The Myth of the War',<sup>6</sup> a historiocultural myth of a consensual narrative about the war centred around an accepted narrative of the disillusionment of a generation of young men by the poor leadership of their elders, and by their inability to adapt to their strategies to the realities of twentieth-century warfare.

The case for this precise narrative of a culture traumatised into uninterest in remembrance followed by a shocked overflowing of angry and regretful invective is strong. It has the strength of linearity and a straightforward narrative arc, however it should be recalled that it is, after all, only one particular version of this history. Michael Paris has pointed out that in the "boys' papers", which George Orwell has described as '[probably] the best available indication of what the mass of English people really feels and thinks',<sup>7</sup> there is a clear demonstration of mass cultural products persisting in the presentation, and thus remembrance, of the war,<sup>8</sup> while Lawrence Napper has documented similar trends in popular cinema during the period as well.<sup>9</sup> In literary terms, George Robb notes that 'There had been a steady trickle of war books as early as 1919, including official and regimental histories and generals' memoirs',<sup>10</sup> while Hynes highlights some examples of "historical novels" in which the war is featured prominently,<sup>11</sup> though he also notes that 'None of these earliest post-war novels is very memorable, and none survives in the canon of First World War literature, but a number of them were extremely successful at the time.'<sup>12</sup> One particular example mentioned by Hynes is *Tell England*, a war novel written by a combatant, which illustrates the point:

*Tell England* was abused, despised, and dismissed by virtually every reviewer (...) *Tell England* was reprinted fourteen times in 1922, and six times in 1923, and was still selling in its fortieth edition in the mid-1960s.<sup>13</sup>

In this we see a steadfastly best-selling novel which does not conform to the

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<sup>6</sup>Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. x.

<sup>7</sup>George Orwell, 'Boys' Weeklies', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 1: An Age like This: 1920 - 1940*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 505–31 (p. 505).

<sup>8</sup>Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion, 2000), p. 149.

<sup>9</sup>Lawrence Napper, *The Great War in Popular British Cinema of the 1920s: Before Journey's End* (Springer, 2015).

<sup>10</sup>Robb, *British Culture and the First World War*, p155

<sup>11</sup>Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 329.

<sup>12</sup>Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 331.

<sup>13</sup>Hynes, *A War Imagined*, pp. 333–34.



accepted historical structure and is dismissed. Yet, as Paris argues, before the Myth of the War was established in the late twenties, it was not the case that reminders of the war were universally and deliberately pushed aside. Rather, 'not only was there a determination on the part of many people to remember the war, but to do so in heroic terms.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as J.M. Winter shows in his examination of the rapid spread of public war memorials, largely funded by subscription, there was a strong urge for remembrance present in the culture directly the War ended.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, as Jessica Meyer has argued, the majority of texts which contribute to the enshrinement of the myth 'would have had a relatively small circulation among the mass reading public of the interwar period.'<sup>16</sup> Accepting the narrative of disillusionment as the sole cultural legacy of the war thus involves an elision of popular culture, and so leaves out works such as Sapper's *Bulldog Drummond* series, which, as we shall see, interpreted the war very differently.

Challenges to the Myth of the War emerged not only retrospectively, but also contemporaneously with its establishment. These challenges questioned not only the underlying anti-war spirit behind the flood of literature, but also the role of the literary establishment in promoting the flood as a spontaneous outpouring of widely held views. Thus Douglas Jerrold's somewhat unhinged attack on the post-1928 explosion in the popularity of war books could claim that books about the War had been suppressed by the literary establishment, and in fact there had been 'scores and scores of earlier books of history, reminiscence and adventure which for the first eight years of the peace followed each other in an unending stream,'<sup>17</sup> but were ignored, and 'the public weren't allowed to want them.'<sup>18</sup> Another contemporary literary figure, Cyril Falls, collated a bibliography of books about the war, simply titled *War Books*. First published in 1930, the book is incredibly partial, and full of glaring omissions,<sup>19</sup> but is nevertheless compelling evidence for the existence of hundreds of books about the War which were published in the interim between the Armistice and

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<sup>14</sup>Paris, p. 153.

<sup>15</sup>J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 10–15.

<sup>16</sup>Jessica Meyer, 'The Tuition of Manhood: Sapper's War Stories and the Literature of War', in *Publishing in the First World War: Essays in Book History*, ed. by Mary Hammond and Shafquat Towheed (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 113–28 (p. 114).

<sup>17</sup>Douglas Jerrold, *The Lie about the War: A Note on Some Contemporary War Books* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1930), p. 11.

<sup>18</sup>Jerrold, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup>None of the main novels discussed in this chapter appear in the book, for instance.

the flood of works beginning in 1928. Indeed, Falls suggests 'it is common gossip that several writers sat down to produce one in the same vein after watching Herr Remarque's sales go soaring into the hundred-thousands.'<sup>20</sup> Thus in his formulation it was not that the publication of books about the War in general had failed to occur in any quantity previously. Rather the sudden success of one particular type of narrative, the disillusioned anti-war narrative which establishes the Myth of the War, led to a rush of authors looking to capitalise on their experiences. It takes only the raging success of one example, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, to alert both publishers and authors alike to a lucrative potential market in books which replicated its place in the ongoing process of literary and cultural remembrance and reflection on the War. What both Jerrold and Falls agree on is the danger inherent in allowing the dominant narrative of the War Book craze to go unquestioned. Theirs is a pro-military stance, keen on emphasising the aspects of war which go unmentioned in the popular works emerging following 1928. It is incumbent on us, then, to acknowledge that whilst their views on the War are perhaps unpalatable, their insistence on identifying and recalling texts omitted from popular consciousness by the Myth of the War reaffirms that remembrance of the War was being actively inscribed upon popular culture prior to the point from which this is generally considered to be the case.

#### Bulldog Drummond intervenes

Acknowledging that active remembrance was an ongoing process from the day the war ended, and not collectively deferred to a later point, we can observe that similar processes were enacted in the field of espionage fiction as in popular culture at large. Amongst the 'official and regimental histories' were a smattering of espionage memoirs like Captain Ferdinand Tuohy's *The Secret Corps*,<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Everitt's *British Secret Service During the Great War*<sup>22</sup> and Sir Paul Dukes' *Red Dusk and the Morrow*.<sup>23</sup> While these would play their part in the cultural legitimisation of espionage as a valid subject for interest, rather than a dirty institutional secret and necessary evil, they were certainly not as widely

<sup>20</sup>Cyril Falls, *War Books : A Critical Guide* (London: Peter Davies, 1930), p. xvi.

<sup>21</sup>Ferdinand Tuohy, *The Secret Corps : A Tale of 'Intelligence' on All Fronts* (London: John Murray, 1920).

<sup>22</sup>Nicholas Everitt, *British Secret Service during the Great War* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1920).

<sup>23</sup>Paul Dukes, *Red Dusk and the Morrow : Adventures and Investigations in Red Russia* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1922).

read as the fictional thrillers which continued to be published in increasing numbers, as the likes of Wallace and Oppenheim did not relent in their ceaseless outpouring of titles. One of Oppenheim's few enduring works, and an immediate popular success, *The Great Impersonation*,<sup>24</sup> was published hot on the heels of the end of the war in 1920, for example. The Richard Hannay series also continued after the war ended with *The Three Hostages*,<sup>25</sup> while Buchan established another espionage series in the Dickson McCunn novels, beginning in 1922 with *Huntingtower*.<sup>26</sup> This period also saw the highly successful ongoing adventures of the sinister German master criminal, Dr Adolph Grundt, who from 1918 regularly faced off against the British Secret Service in Valentine Williams' *Clubfoot* series. However, it was a new name that was to dominate espionage fiction during the twenties, and this was one H.C. McNiele, known more commonly by his pseudonym "Sapper".

Sapper's hero, Captain Hugh "Bulldog" Drummond, starred in a series of wildly popular novels in the twenties and into the thirties, and the thriller-reading public embraced them warmly enough to lead to the production of countless spin-offs and adaptations on stage and screen. The author himself, his pen-name taken from his actual wartime role in the Royal Engineers, initially found success in the writing of combat stories throughout the war. These stories were published in *The Daily Mail*, and 'generally featured on page 4, where they could hardly be missed by any reader,'<sup>27</sup> before being anthologised into bestselling collections with martial titles such as *Sergeant Michael Cassidy R.E.*,<sup>28</sup> *Men, Women and Guns*<sup>29</sup> and *No Man's Land*.<sup>30</sup> In an examination of the critical and popular reception of Sapper's output during the war, Lise Jaillant concludes that somewhat surprisingly he 'combined high sales with enthusiastic reviews in distinguished newspapers.'<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Hynes refers to *Sergeant Michael Cassidy R.E.* as 'one of two books published during 1915 [that] did get beyond the conventions of the war-novel genre,'<sup>32</sup> and to Sappers' collections in general as 'realistic in their treatment of the particulars of war.'<sup>33</sup>

<sup>24</sup>E. Phillips Oppenheim, *The Great Impersonation*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1920).

<sup>25</sup>John Buchan, *The Three Hostages* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1924).

<sup>26</sup>John Buchan, *Huntingtower* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1922).

<sup>27</sup>Lise Jaillant, 'Sapper, Hodder & Stoughton, and the Popular Literature of the Great War', *Book History*, 14 (2011), 137–166 (p. 140).

<sup>28</sup>Sapper, *Sergeant Michael Cassidy, R.E.* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915).

<sup>29</sup>Sapper, *Men, Women, and Guns* (London, 1916).

<sup>30</sup>Sapper, *No Man's Land* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1917).

<sup>31</sup>Jaillant, p. 144.

<sup>32</sup>Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 47.

<sup>33</sup>Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. 48.

It was only after the war that Sapper turned to the production of novels, initially with a muddled and not very popular story of romance featuring a returning soldier's failed pursuit of love with two women, *Mufti*,<sup>34</sup> and soon after with the Bulldog Drummond series, which were a runaway success. Each of the first four novels in the series, *Bulldog Drummond* (1920), *The Black Gang* (1922), *The Third Round* (1924) and *The Final Count* (1926), sold well in excess of 100,00 copies by 1930 and 200,000 copies by 1939.<sup>35</sup> His popularity was even enough to earn him an exalted level of scorn from Q.D. Leavis as a representative of "lowbrow" fiction swamping the market alongside Edgar Wallace and Sax Rohmer.<sup>36</sup>

The Bulldog Drummond series' popularity is at least partially a result of their direct descent from John Buchan's similarly bestselling Richard Hannay novels, which were discussed above, and the familial resemblance between the series is evident. Even on a fundamental level of social characterisation the likeness is clear, as Richard Osborne acknowledged in including both Drummond and Hannay as peers in his study, *Clubland Heroes*, an examination of thriller heroes who emerged from the *milieu* of the London club. Occupation of "clubland" is an explicit marker of class, and this has been the case since their rise to prominence as the seats of Beau Brummell and the Regency dandies. As such, Hannay and Drummond's association with these institutions reveals immediately their social positions respective to the majority of the population. Though the novels in which they star are products of mass culture, these characters share class origins which would place them as separate from the working or lower-middle class audience which would constitute the bulk of their readership. In fact, in the espionage narratives we have considered thus far, there are very few in which 'clubland' would be considered alien for their protagonists. The figures who occupy these narratives have been described as 'society heroes'<sup>37</sup>; Childers' hero Carruthers receives the fateful letter from Davies while dining at his club, and Oppenheim and Le Queux's heroes, when not away on the Riviera, or on their country estates, are usually to be found at their club when in town. The notable exceptions come in the pre-war genre iconoclasts in which their innovative adoptions of the genre are coupled with

<sup>34</sup>Sapper, *Mufti* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1919).

<sup>35</sup>For a detailed breakdown of Sapper's sales figures, see Meyer., p122

<sup>36</sup>Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), p. 7.

<sup>37</sup>William Vivian Butler, *The Durable Desperadoes* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 186.

less typical protagonists such as Chesterton's Gabriel Syme or Conrad's unseemly casts.

The family likeness between Hannay and Drummond emerges in the first instance from the fact that Sapper's novels, in common with a large proportion of inter-war thrillers, as well as many more following that period, are inescapably derivative of Buchan. Cawelti and Rosenberg assert that in 'his elaboration of the structure of the hurried journey or flight and pursuit (...) Buchan developed the basic rhythms of the spy story.'<sup>38</sup> As such, any thrillers adhering to the espionage formula mould, as the Bulldog Drummond series do, are in the very least structurally of a kind with Buchan. However in some respects the connection between Drummond and Hannay is even more straightforward than this. As we saw earlier, prior to the onset of his escapades Richard Hannay considered himself 'The best bored man in the United Kingdom,'<sup>39</sup> and fortuitously, adventure sought him out. Drummond is introduced similarly, although in his case, as a soldier bored of peace, he is driven to take the initiative and advertise his services for hire:

Demobilised officer (...) finding peace incredibly tedious, would welcome diversion. Legitimate, if possible, but crime, if of a comparatively humorous description, no objection. Excitement essential.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike Hannay, whose initial adventure is initially imposed upon him and only latterly acknowledged as a worthy salve for his civilian *ennui*, Drummond is explicit in his statement that amusement is his primary goal. Hannay finds himself falling foul of the law through misadventure and conspiracy, while Drummond is direct in admitting that his desire for excitement may well only be satisfied by a deliberate law-breaking. In this we see that though the superficial resemblance is clear, there are also clear divisions between the spirit which motivates the two series.

Although Hannay initially finds himself at odds with the police, trapped into the appearance of guilt by Scudder's inexplicable death in his flat and thus on the run from the law until his innocence can be proved, Hannay himself is

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<sup>38</sup>John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Spy Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>39</sup>John Buchan, 'The Thirty-Nine Steps', in *The Complete Richard Hannay* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 1–104 (p. 5).

<sup>40</sup>Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', in *Bulldog Drummond: The Carl Peterson Quartet* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), pp. 1–204 (p. 14).

fundamentally deferential to authority, and soon finds himself an official representative of the government as he ascends through the ranks of the army as the series progresses. As Osborne points out, to qualify as a hero in Buchan, 'You had to merit at least a column in *The Times* when you died.'<sup>41</sup> Though Hannay himself is somewhat of an outsider to begin with, and his companions are frequently unconventional or marginal figures, they are easily adopted by the establishment and rapidly assimilated into it. Even Peter Pienaar, the South African mercenary rogue of dubious legal history turns fighter pilot and war hero. Drummond, on the other hand, is from the outset a figure firmly rooted within the establishment. We learn that he was the Police Commissioner's "fag" at school, and in *The Black Gang*, he knowingly exploits his social position to gain entry to a social climber's party without invitation. However, his actual relationship and interactions with figures of conventional authority are much less respectful than Hannay's, and he shows little interest in the approval or sponsorship of official legal structures. The police detective, McIver, for instance, is a figure of fun for Drummond, and on one occasion, when the police threaten to intervene in one of his vigilante schemes, they are chloroformed *en masse* by Drummond and his men and left on McIver's doorstep, with pillows beneath their heads. Official police work is dismissed as a process whereby 'one filled in a form and waited';<sup>42</sup> tiresome and needlessly time-consuming. As a result, his methods of justice and punishment fall well outside the bounds of the law, not least in the kidnapping and imprisonment of untried criminals by his Black Gang in the novel of the same name, and in his disposal of adversaries in acid baths and by electric fence. Matthew Paris has suggested that Drummond's disrespect for authority is a typical 'facet of inter-war fictions, both literary and cinematic: lack of respect for established authority and a tendency to anarchic behaviour.'<sup>43</sup> Drummond is thus typical of an odd correlation of elements present in the post-war environment. He is quintessentially a soldier and thus dependent on a regimented way of life but the failures of his superiors have introduced an element of doubt into the structure. For a man of his martial abilities, he can rely on those skills and those of his direct comrades, with his gang taking the place of his regiment, far more than on the orders and

<sup>41</sup>Richard Osborne, *Clubland Heroes: A Nostalgic Study of Some Recurrent Characters in the Romantic Fiction of Dornford Yates, John Buchan and Sapper*, 3rd edn (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p. 89.

<sup>42</sup>Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', p. 89.

<sup>43</sup>Paris, p. 165.

structures imposed from above. Hannay and his cast of comrades represent a different kind of individualism, one in which the individual himself is crucial to history, but is fundamentally an instrument of the maintenance of order, signified by the speed with which he progresses from being on the run to being a legitimate instrument of government.

Considered as generic thrillers, the Drummond stories generally follow a fairly predictable formula, and indeed one which is familiar to any reader of this kind of narrative. Umberto Eco famously reduced the James Bond novels to a series of 'invariable' elements,<sup>44</sup> and though his elements are specific to Ian Fleming's novels, a general schematic of the thriller could be similarly produced,<sup>45</sup> and a more informal version of the same method can be applied to Sapper's novels: Drummond becomes embroiled in the scheme of a master criminal, (in the early stories this is always his nemesis, Carl Peterson); after initial confusion regarding the nature of the task he faces, he comes, via a mixture of providence and detective work, to an understanding of the details of the scheme, as well as its audacity and deviousness; he sets out to foil the plot and appears about to succeed but is discovered and captured; all seems lost, until Drummond's strength and resourcefulness allow his escape, followed by the rounding up of henchmen and decisive victory over evil. The formula is not rigid, but these elements are generally present in each novel. Eco's structuralist reading of Fleming characterises the thriller as a repetition of a familiar scheme, and his description can again be reasonably applied to Drummond as much as to Bond:

Under the guise of a machine that produces information, the criminal novel produces redundancy; pretending to rouse the reader, it in fact reconfirms him in a sort of imaginative laziness and creates escape by narrating, not the Unknown, but the Already Known.<sup>46</sup>

This being the case, it perhaps begs the question of what separates Sapper's hero from any number of other formulaic fictional productions arising around the same period.

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<sup>44</sup>Umberto Eco, 'Narrative Structures in Fleming', in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 144–74 (p. 156).

<sup>45</sup>Eco's proposed structure for the Bond novels actually represents a fair approximation of the Drummond novels, if the elements relating to Bond's sexual conquests are removed.

<sup>46</sup>Eco, p. 160.

Aside from the quality of Sapper's writing, which at its best reaches peaks of Wodehousian levity, but at its worst has been described as of 'little aesthetic merit, being stylised, clichéd and often repetitive,'<sup>47</sup> what especially distinguishes the Bulldog Drummond series is an intimate and inherent engagement with the legacy of the First World War and its resultant cultural and economic legacy. Drummond himself is explicitly a product of the trenches; lack of combat has driven him to distraction, and it is only in war that his particular skills are allowed free reign to excel. Drummond recruits a band of fellow veterans to his cause, his 'irregulars', a much more highly trained collection of fighting men than Sherlock Holmes' Baker Street variety, and is able to do so because of the authority-capital granted by his wartime exploits. A chilling description of his efficacy in the removal of Germans suggests that a mixture of fear and respect of his preternatural talents leads to the unquestioning loyalty of his men:

Perhaps a patrol coming back would report a German, lying huddled in a shell-hole, with no trace of a wound, but only a broken neck; perhaps the patrol never found anything. But whatever the report, Hugh Drummond only grinned and saw to his men's breakfasts. Which is why there are in England today quite a number of civilians who acknowledge only two rulers - the King and Hugh Drummond. And they would willingly die for either.<sup>48</sup>

In the world constructed by the Drummond novels, the links between ex-combatants are considered stronger and more significant than those which form the stability and coherence of civil society. Indeed, the reference to Drummond cheerfully seeing 'to his men's breakfasts' after a night of strangling highlights another aspect of these bonds; the heightened comfort of a shared fraternal experience. This is itself an extension of the characterisation of Drummond as a 'sportsman and a gentleman'<sup>49</sup> and his adventures as 'sport', which is made clear in the sporting titles assigned to the novels, such as *The Third Round* and *The Final Count*. This immediately locates them within a specific environment in which public school ideas of non-lethal rough-housing and sense of civic order

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<sup>47</sup>Meyer, p. 113.

<sup>48</sup>Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', p. 65.

<sup>49</sup>Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', p. 15.



are taken as intrinsic to the exercise of power by the British ruling class, a phenomenon which Colin Watson has described as 'a philosophy that over the years had been built into every stratum of rulership, instruction and administration by the public school system.'<sup>50</sup> More often than not, Drummond's behaviour is delineated by the limits inherent in an upbringing within the assumption of the rules of 'sport' and 'sportsmanship' as promoted by this system.

The ultimate expression of Drummond's motivation is given in the eponymous first novel. In the face of great danger and following his confrontation of an international criminal organisation, he gives a 'chuckle' and reflects 'Was it not sport in a land flowing with strikes and profiteers; sport such as his soul loved?'<sup>51</sup> In this concise turn of phrase, we see illustrated the most significant elements of Drummond's character. Firstly, the reduction of peril to 'sport', as discussed above, and secondly, a reduction of 'strikers' and 'profiteers' to prey for this sport. In the environment of Britain in the twenties, Drummond represents an exaggeratedly stable and reassuring figure beset on the one hand by labour unrest and on the other by unregulated capitalism. This is in fact the specific configuration of elements that Eric Hobsbawm has described as the inspiration for the rise of Fascism in Europe: 'the resentment of little men in society that crushed them between the big rock of business on one side and the hard place of rising labour movements on the other.'<sup>52</sup> The possible danger of the latter is straightforward to a man in Drummond's position, while the former is an example of a trend in society's response to the expansion of global capitalism in this period 'which ascribes both international and domestic strife to machinations of evil foreign capitalists (as opposed to good, honest, inventive British capitalists)'.<sup>53</sup> These contrasting threats are aimed at the heart of the stable social order which for Drummond and his irregulars is perfectly explicable, and in a sense, "natural". For while his adventures reveal his emergent anarchic reliance on himself and his men, as opposed to a reliance on the protection offered by society, they do not reveal a more fundamental

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<sup>50</sup>Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence English Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), p. 48.

<sup>51</sup>Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', p. 77.

<sup>52</sup>Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 2011), p. 119.

<sup>53</sup>LeRoy Panek, *The Special Branch: The British Spy Novel, 1890-1980* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p. 80.

desire to change the order itself, which is taken as God-given.<sup>54</sup>

In *Bulldog Drummond*, Algy Longworth, one of Drummond's irregulars, in a break from reclining and sipping cocktails, remarks that 'People are so funny nowadays (...) The most unlikely souls seem to be doing things and trying to look as if they were necessary.'<sup>55</sup> Like Drummond, he is a veteran of the trenches and will play an extensive role in Drummond's peacetime adventures, and yet his character is formed around familiar stereotypes of the foppish, ineffectual aristocrat. Algy's attitude is typical of a kind of exaggerated *sprezzatura* which masks the effort involved in maintaining the *status quo* in order to cause it to appear natural and non-ideological; the usual defence claimed by the reactionary in favour of the Establishment. The same is true of the insistence on Drummond's "common sense" approach to the world, which allows him to see through to some essential truth about reality which is obscured for deeper thinkers: 'he was undoubtedly the possessor of a very shrewd common sense, which generally enabled him to arrive at the same result as a far more brilliant man and, incidentally, by a much more direct route.'<sup>56</sup> In this context, intellectualism, or "cleverness", as Drummond would put it, are deeply suspicious, and by extension, Drummond responds to any kind of ideologically motivated attempt to change the social order with little distinction between the actual contents of the ideologies involved. They are treated homogeneously as disruptive, and thus function primarily as narrative elements, shorn of external significance. Revolutionaries are therefore described as 'Bolshevists, Anarchists, members of the Do-no-work-and-have-all-the-money Brigade.'<sup>57</sup>

With such nonsensical descriptions presented as meaningful, it is not surprising that Sapper's novels often expect the reader to grant credence to what is, on the face of it, a bizarre and unholy alliance between international capital and what Sapper usually refers to as 'Bolshevism'. That such elements are instead fundamentally contradictory is not important in narrative terms, as in this role they are intended only to represent the blatant multiplication of external

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<sup>54</sup> See Hans Bertens, 'A Society of Murderers Run on Sound Conservative Lines: The Life and Times of Sapper's *Bulldog Drummond*', in *Twentieth-Century Suspense: The Thriller Comes of Age*, ed. by Clive Bloom (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 51–68 (p. 56).

<sup>55</sup> Panek, p. 79.

<sup>56</sup> Sapper, 'The Third Round', in *Bulldog Drummond: The Carl Peterson Quartet* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), pp. 393–584 (p. 417).

<sup>57</sup> Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', p. 139.

chaos against British order. It is also an alliance in which the latter of these elements is always subordinate. In Sapper's hands, 'Bolshevism' is never anything more than a mass delusion imposed on the poor, foolish and easily-led working classes by ruthless, cynical and opportunistic robber barons. Any possible economic principles are presented as foolhardy misunderstandings liable to soften the brains of decent working men and lead them into the service of villains without scruples. For Drummond this is fundamental and is expressed as a nightmarish fear:

in his mind's eye he saw the great crowds of idle, foolish men led by a few hot-headed visionaries and paid blackguards to their so-called Utopia. Starvation, misery, ruin, utter and complete, lurked in his mental picture; spectres disguised as great ideals, but grinning sardonically under their masks. And once again he seemed to hear the toc-toc of machine guns, as he had heard them night after night during the years gone by. But this time they were mounted on the pavement of the towns of England,<sup>58</sup>

In an England invaded not by Germans or Russians, but by ideals, Drummond's martial nostalgia for combat is lost in a twisted vision which ruptures the pleasant continuity of home. Except, of course, these are not really ideals at all, but rather 'spectres'. There is a continuing refusal within the Drummond novels to dignify any ideals as valid, and instead to consider them all as straightforward misunderstandings. Any expression of an alternative structure to society is dismissed as dangerous because the *status quo* is taken for granted. In a sense we can detect in this another parallel with Richard Hannay, whose enemies, though usually motivated by some form of patriotism rather than capitalism or "Bolshevism", were nevertheless rendered extraordinarily dangerous and inexplicable by their fanaticism.

In a moment of self-reflection, Drummond notes 'on the subject of Capital and Labour I am supremely ignorant.'<sup>59</sup> Such ignorance is not, it should be said, to be taken as intended as a negative quality in the context of the environment constructed in these novels. Nevertheless, while he may be ignorant of these subjects, he is not ignorant of the issues they generate. In other moments of clarity, Drummond reveals the cognitive dissonance involved in maintaining

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<sup>58</sup>Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', p. 143.

<sup>59</sup>Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', p. 198.

obedience to the structures and assumptions of the society he inhabits. Quietly he is beset by doubts which threaten to compromise his position of detached privilege: 'Like most normal Englishmen, politics and labour disputes had left him cold in the past; but no-one who ever glanced at a newspaper could be ignorant of the volcano that had been simmering just beneath the surface for years past.'<sup>60</sup> These doubts are expressed obliquely, as if psychically painful expressions of heresy arising against his better judgement. Apparently even a sportsman of the Drummond type cannot remain blind to the fault-lines emerging around him. He concedes the validity of the economic situation leading ordinary Englishmen away from the path of the righteous, as he rages against the manipulative powers of revolutionary leaders, 'And as for your miserable dupes - those priceless fellows who follow you blindly because (God help them) they're hungry and their wives are hungry - what do you care for them?'<sup>61</sup> Unlike the ideological solutions such leaders preach, which are dismissed as illusions, the economic reality cannot be waved away so easily. Sapper's narratives do not always omit the unemployed men in the street with 'the apathy of despair on their faces' and 'the sullenness of lost hope.'<sup>62</sup>

Despite such moments of insight, it remains the case that a coherently formulated expression of resistance to the *status quo* is left to extreme and marginal figures. *The Final Count* presents us with Robin Gaunt, a scientist who has come to the conclusion that the First World War was not the end, but rather the beginning, of an era of conflict, stating 'now I realise, as all of us realise, that we've merely gone back a few centuries.'<sup>63</sup> With this realisation comes his solution, an invention for the enactment of 'Universal, instantaneous death over as large or as small an area as is desired.'<sup>64</sup> By his logic, the invention would, through mass extermination, bring about peace, after just one demonstration. This is immediately and jarringly shocking to Gaunt's friend, later Drummond's ally, John Stockton, who labels Gaunt's assertions 'Rot and rubbish (...) like the wild figment of a sensational novelist's brain.'<sup>65</sup> Quite aside from the fact that any possibility labelled 'rot and rubbish' in a novel such as this will almost

<sup>60</sup>Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', p. 189.

<sup>61</sup>Sapper, 'The Black Gang', in *Bulldog Drummond: The Carl Peterson Quartet* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), pp. 205–392 (p. 253).

<sup>62</sup>Sapper, 'The Black Gang', p. 258.

<sup>63</sup>Sapper, 'The Final Count', in *Bulldog Drummond: The Carl Peterson Quartet* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), pp. 585–768 (p. 592).

<sup>64</sup>Sapper, 'The Final Count', p. 593.

<sup>65</sup>Sapper, 'The Final Count', p. 594.

inevitably transpire, the intensity of such language emphasises how Stockton, presented as the reasonable Everyman, is in contrast with Gaunt's extreme position. As far as he is concerned, Gaunt's plans are the product of a weak, ruined mind. The implication is clear: strident pacifism, like any principled ideal, is a symptom of such a mind, that is, a mind already vulnerable to disorder, and in Gaunt's case further undermined by the trauma of actual war. To begin with, this manifests as the invention of his horrific weapon and the stated intention to bring about world peace by mutually assured destruction. Gaunt's mental collapse is to progress further, however, under trauma at the hands of Peterson's men. Through his own journals we witness Gaunt descend from a functional, though misguided, madness to a complete loss of reason. Nevertheless this eventual collapse is predicated initially on his failure of faith in the ability of Bismarckian diplomacy and the military-industrial complex to peacefully resolve the structural tensions of international relations. It is a challenge to orthodoxy, which results in a systematic rejection of that orthodoxy, rather than a series of individual and unreconciled misgivings, which brings Gaunt down. In contrast, his refusal, or inability, to reconcile his misgivings into a coherent system of thought is what allows Drummond to continue to charge head-first through life.

Without a unifying theory in which to invest his doubts, Drummond reverts, ultimately, to repressive and regressive measures in defence of the *status quo*. In *The Black Gang*, Drummond demonstrates what he considers to be the height of poetic justice, as his gang kidnaps potential revolutionaries to an uninhabited Scottish island where their supposed ideals for the reorganisation of society can be enacted under the watchful eye of a Sergeant Major of the British Army. It is difficult with hindsight to avoid the correlation of this humorously intended solution with the spectre of concentration camps, and furthermore, Drummond himself frequently displays great pleasure in the performance of violence. This is pleasure not only in the violence itself, but also in the reaction of his victims, such as on witnessing the effect of his actions on Lakington, one of Peterson's co-conspirators in *Bulldog Drummond*: 'with a smile of joy Hugh watched his frenzied terror.'<sup>66</sup> For Drummond, there is a sadistic satisfaction in "righteous" violence. As Hans Bertens has indicated, in

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<sup>66</sup>Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', p. 183.

innumerable ways, 'Drummond's actions "double" those of his opponents,'<sup>67</sup> punishing villains with their own devices, and in this respect, '[h]e is not light-years away from the criminal other, but is his double.'<sup>68</sup> It is also impossible to ignore the anti-Semitism and general jingoism that is pervasive in these novels. Casual reference is made to 'Russia ruled by its clique of homicidal alien Jews,'<sup>69</sup> Jewish characters are often characterised by negative stereotypes, involved in morally despicable trades such as the White Slave trade and viciously punished, while foreigners in general, usually Russians or Germans, are objects of suspicion, consumed by envy and bitterness towards Britain.

The Britain which Drummond strives to defend is both the supposed bucolic paradise of rigid and respected class distinctions and the economically deprived and politically divided country of reality. Algy Longworth lounges in his club spouting epigrams while the unemployed masses go hungry in the street, and, with this in mind, it is jarring to recognise that what Drummond's longing for 'sport' and seeking of fraternal companionship reveal is an underlying nostalgia. In the character this is revealed as a nostalgia for the war just past; a nostalgia for the life of the trenches in which he was able to live to his fullest without complication. This is further emphasised by Drummond's relationship with his wife, Phyllis. Introduced in the first novel as a respondent to his advertisement, the couple are married at the completion of the story and, hereafter, Phyllis barely appears in the novels, except as an absent muse for Drummond's internal monologue as he struggles against implausible odds. Drummond feels intensely the need to protect his wife, but feels very little else towards her. Instead, the deepest, or at least the most clearly expressed, feelings of closeness he experiences throughout the novels are for his nemesis, Carl Peterson. At the conclusion of *Bulldog Drummond*, it is not his marriage that most completely soothes his soul, but the receipt of a note, which reveals that Peterson lives on still, allowing Drummond to muse '[a]ssuredly life was still good; assuredly...'<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in *The Third Round*, the apparent absence of his enemy causes Drummond to sigh '[o]h for the touch of a vanished hand (...)' Carl – my Carl – it cannot be that we shall never meet again.'<sup>71</sup> Peterson is

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<sup>67</sup>Bertens, p. 66. – Bertens lists many examples of this phenomenon.

<sup>68</sup>Bertens, p. 67.

<sup>69</sup>Sapper, 'The Final Count', p. 732.

<sup>70</sup>Sapper, 'The Black Gang', p. 203.

<sup>71</sup>Sapper, 'The Third Round', p. 459.

Drummond's Moriarty, 'a foeman worthy of his steel.'<sup>72</sup> The presence of an implacable and demoniacal enemy is a psychological crutch for him; a comprehensible threat, whose cynical simplicity is easily explicable to Drummond's 'common sense' mind. In a sense Peterson's manipulation of others' ideological commitments is a corrupted version of Drummond's ideological blindness. For Peterson, such unsophisticated devotions exist as points of mental weakness into which he can insert his schemes. Thus he appeals to German capitalists on terms of revenge against England and employs Russian 'Bolshevist' revolutionaries in the same plot, enticing them with the promise of revolution against capitalism. Like the invasion novels which preceded the First World War, the Bulldog Drummond novels demonstrate an anxiety at the level of popular culture regarding the ease with which Great Britain could be brought to her knees. However, unlike these novels, Sapper resolves this anxiety not through experiments in fanciful conflict and pitched battles, but in the fraudulent mirage of orchestration by a single individual represented by Peterson. The various schemes deployed against the country are composed of coalitions of enemies; cynically self-interested capitalists, ideologically misguided zealots, envious foreigners and ordinary men who have been duped, but it is only through the leadership of one villainous superman that these forces can be brought to bear in unison. Similarly, Drummond marshals all of the forces at his disposal against Peterson, in the form of his irregulars. In the final reckoning, however, these contests are man-to-man; a pseudo-Manichean conflict reduced to its two mirror avatars locked in combat.

In one of the very few literary allusions in the Bulldog Drummond series, Victor Hugo is quoted approvingly: "The faults of women, children, servants, the weak, the indigents, and the ignorant are the faults of husbands, fathers, the strong, the rich and the learned."<sup>73</sup> It is a rare moment of direct theoretical meditation inserted into these action-packed narratives, and reveals much about the spirit which animates the novels. Interwoven with the focus on Drummond's physical exertions and frequent anti-intellectualism is an occasional reverence for culture and thought above the levels at which he himself operates. We learn, for example, that during his time as Bryan Johnstone's 'fag', 'for some inscrutable reason the quiet scholarship of the elder

<sup>72</sup>Sapper, 'The Third Round', p. 505.

<sup>73</sup>Sapper, 'Bulldog Drummond', p. 190.

boy had appealed to the kid of fourteen who was even then a mass of brawn.<sup>74</sup> It is characteristic of the contradictory spirit of the novels: paternalistic and patronising to the working classes, while deeply afraid of their dormant power, which is so easily unleashed by ideological delusions; fiercely protective of existing power structures, while all-too aware of their failures; in love with war, but devoted to peace.

With these contradictory impulses in mind, we can identify Bulldog Drummond as being in a complex relationship with many of the tensions and fissures in society following the end of the First World War. William Vivian Butler has written that Sapper was one of a group of authors in the inter-war period who 'succeeded partly because they were supplying the economically beleaguered middle and upper classes with compensatory dream-worlds.'<sup>75</sup> These are dream world resolutions in which doubts are hastily repressed and transgressions against society's underlying assumptions are violently punished; conformity for the many, policed by the capable, "common sense" few. As Bertens puts it, 'The security of the British nation rests, then, on two solid foundations: the collective - and utterly homogeneous - ideology of the upper middle class and the absolute superiority of one individual.'<sup>76</sup>

The Richard Hannay novels warned against the dangers of fanaticism and the perils of charismatic leadership by invoking the protective aura of the Establishment, and its ability to absorb the talents of exceptional men who could rise through its structure. Conversely, the Bulldog Drummond novels, whilst retaining Buchan's mistrust of ideological fanaticism, suggest instead that the establishment is frail, and requires the unsanctioned intervention of powerful men. The lionization of Drummond's strength is tantamount to what George Orwell would later describe as 'Bully-worship,'<sup>77</sup> and given the morally questionable ends to which Drummond frequently puts his strength, once again we must return to the spectre of fascism which haunts these texts. As a charismatic leader, whose men follow him without question, and for whom the laws and bureaucratic structures of society are considered optional, Drummond resembles the archetypal totalitarian leader. In Sapper's novels, he is usually

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<sup>74</sup>Sapper, 'The Black Gang', p. 223.

<sup>75</sup>Butler, p. 69.

<sup>76</sup>Bertens, p. 60.

<sup>77</sup>George Orwell, 'Review: *Power: A New Social Analysis* by Bertrand Russell', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 1: An Age like This: 1920 - 1940*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 413-14.



pulled back from this position by the gossamer threads of traditional institutions that bind him to those around him; Phyllis prevents him from murdering Peterson in cold blood, Bryan Johnstone persuades him to dismantle his labour camp. Without those threads, or with them pulling him otherwise, Drummond would be very dangerous indeed. Later, following the rise to power of the regimes in Germany and Italy, Nicholas Blake's novel *The Smiler with the Knife* would demonstrate danger in the Drummond mould in the character of Chilton Canteloe, charismatic leader of the "English Banner", an aristocratic fifth column plotting the downfall of British democracy and his installation as dictator.<sup>78</sup>

#### 1928: Disenchantment in Culture and in Espionage Fiction

Following the death of Carl Peterson in Bulldog Drummond's fourth outing, *The Final Count*, Peterson's female companion, Irma, would take up the mantle of facing up to Drummond, beginning with *The Female of the Species* in 1928. The series had peaked with the Peterson stories, and while the new novels would continue with great success, this change coincided with the flood of War Books referred to above. Although reflection on the Great War was not so universally deferred as has often been asserted, it is nevertheless clear that a decade after the war did mark some form of genuine watershed in the publication of texts involved in this reflection. Paul Fussell notes,

it is a fact of literary history not always mentioned that the year 1928, a decade after the war, is notable for two unique kinds of books: on the one hand, the first of the war memoirs setting themselves the task of remembering "the truth about the war"; on the other, clever novels exhibiting a generation of bright young men at war with their elders.<sup>79</sup>

As his examples to support this assertion, he raises Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* and Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*. Doubtless there are many others that could be mentioned, and I do not wish to dispute his claim. Instead, let us expand these categories to include espionage fiction as a third unique kind of book, for 1928 is notable as a year in which a distinct divergence from the Buchan-Sapper model is established with the publication of W. Somerset

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<sup>78</sup>Nicholas Blake, *The Smiler with the Knife* (London: Vintage, 2012).

<sup>79</sup>Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 25th Anniversary edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 109.

Maugham's *Ashenden* and Compton Mackenzie's *Extremes Meet*, which was closely followed the next year by *The Three Couriers*, featuring the same cast of characters. Maugham and Mackenzie were not bright young men like Huxley and Waugh were at this time, but their interventions in the espionage writing genre were, in that limited sphere, of similarly seismic impact, although it should be noted that though 1928 did see this divergence, it did not herald the dominance of this kind of espionage narrative. Thus, as Hynes observes, 'It was probably about the Spring of '28, that the public first ceased to think of itself as "post-War", - and began to feel that it was living in the epoch "preceding the next great War".'<sup>80</sup>

For the most part, the year's espionage novels remained unremarkable. There were two outings for Alexander Wilson's traditional Imperial master-spy Sir Leonard Wallace in India, *The Mystery of Tunnel 51*<sup>81</sup> and *The Devil's Cocktail*,<sup>82</sup> Le Queux continued with spy stories such as *The Secret Formula*,<sup>83</sup> Sydney Horler published multiple spy stories including *Miss Mystery*<sup>84</sup> and *Chipstead of the Lone Hand*,<sup>85</sup> while Valentine Williams' Clubfoot made an appearance in *The Crouching Beast*,<sup>86</sup> and even novels making use of the relatively fresh backdrop of the League of Nations in Switzerland, such as Peter Oldfield's *Death of a Diplomat*<sup>87</sup> and William Penmare's *The Black Swan*,<sup>88</sup> otherwise resisted generic innovation. Maugham and Mackenzie's fresh approaches were very much a niche development whose influence would not emerge immediately.

Neither author's espionage writings have been granted much critical attention, and while *Ashenden* remains widely available, Mackenzie's spy stories are long out of print. In truth, in both cases these are generally passed over as minor examples of the authors' respective outputs. This is not a purely retrospective lacuna, as a number of contemporary reviews share a lack of enthusiasm towards them, curiously accusing both of exhibiting a lack of conviction. *Ashenden* is labelled 'only moderately entertaining' and described as

<sup>80</sup>Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 40.

<sup>81</sup>Alexander Douglas Wilson, *The Mystery of Tunnel 51*. (London, 1928).

<sup>82</sup>Alexander Douglas Wilson, *The Devil's Cocktail*. (London, 1928).

<sup>83</sup>William Le Queux, *The Secret Formula* (London: Ward, Lock & Co., 1928).

<sup>84</sup>Sydney Horler, *Miss Mystery* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928).

<sup>85</sup>Sydney Horler, *Chipstead of the Lone Hand* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928).

<sup>86</sup>Valentine Williams, *The Crouching Beast: A Clubfoot Story* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928).

<sup>87</sup>Peter Oldfield, *The Death of a Diplomat* (London: Constable & Co., 1928).

<sup>88</sup>William Penmare, *The Black Swan* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928).

'a series of disconnected episodes quite obviously concocted, with not very great enthusiasm,'<sup>89</sup> while *Extremes Meet* 'is not as exciting as it should be, because Mr. Mackenzie is at heart too serious a novelist for this sort of spy-stuff and cannot quite persuade himself to take it seriously,'<sup>90</sup> making for 'a rather tired, a rather cold book.'<sup>91</sup> In each case, the accusation is that these works are not thrilling enough to stand on the shelf with real thrillers and not serious enough to be considered with their authors' greatest works. Nevertheless, despite this critical reception and limited interest since, it has been frequently suggested that *Ashenden* represents the birth of the modern espionage novel. The same claim is not made for Mackenzie's novels, but given their virtually contemporaneous publication and treatment of the subject with what is, to a great degree, a shared outlook, it is difficult to assert the primacy of one over the other. Literary consensus being as it is, the perpetual restatement of *Ashenden's* case has meant a marginalisation of Mackenzie's novels, which have received little notice, with Eric Ambler himself proving the exception when he noted of *The Three Couriers* that he 'could not understand why it had received so little attention.'<sup>92</sup> There is no need to argue the case for one over the other; we can instead acknowledge their co-parentage of the new branch of espionage novels which would emerge from this point, leading to the Ambler-Greene story and eventually beyond into the Cold War world of John Le Carré, Len Deighton and the rest.

Both Mackenzie and Maugham were active in the service of British Intelligence during the First World War, or as Ralph Fox describes it in *Left Review*, 'they sunk right into the sewers of the war-time corruption and took jobs in the intelligence service.'<sup>93</sup> As such, the episodes involved in their respective espionage narratives are extensively culled from true life experiences. Indeed, Mackenzie's later biographical account of the real-life intrigues that inspired the novels, *Greek Memories*,<sup>94</sup> was to earn him a prosecution under the Official Secrets Act which itself was to inspire the later publication of an absurdist take

<sup>89</sup>Orlo Williams, 'Ashenden', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 April 1928, p. 270.

<sup>90</sup>L. P. Hartley, 'New Fiction', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*; London, 146.3793 (1928), 22–24 (p. 24).

<sup>91</sup>A. N. M., 'Books of the Day: New Novels', *The Manchester Guardian* (Manchester (UK), United Kingdom, Manchester (UK), 22 June 1928), p. 7.

<sup>92</sup>Ambler, *To Catch a Spy. An Anthology of Favourite Spy Stories*, p. 20.

<sup>93</sup> Ralph Fox, 'Henri Barbusse', *Left Review*, 2.1 (1935), 3–6.

<sup>94</sup>Compton Mackenzie, *Greek Memories* (London: Cassell, 1932).

on the espionage genre and the espionage business in *Water on the Brain*.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, both were active in roles which are more accurately described as “handlers” than “agents”. They co-ordinated the activities and, perhaps most importantly, the salaries of the hired agents who conducted the actual acts of espionage; local waiters, clerks and servants working in enemy areas which British personnel themselves could not access. This translates directly into the novels.

Ashenden, working out of a Geneva hotel, was living a life ‘as orderly and monotonous as a city clerk’s. He saw his spies at stated intervals and paid them their wages; when he could get hold of a new one, he engaged him.’<sup>96</sup> Meanwhile, Mackenzie’s protagonist, Roger Waterlow, with the help of ‘a distinguished antiquarian called Henderson,’<sup>97</sup> oversees a vast card index containing information on the minutest details of intrigue around the Aegean, ‘which was by now at once a monument to his judiciously sceptical mind and the solid foundation of whatever practical success this branch of the Bureau had achieved.’<sup>98</sup> The management of information is the real core of both Ashenden and Waterlow’s work, whilst forays into fieldwork are rarer, though such events do provide the stories with peak moments of narrative tension, in which consolidated information is tested in the real world, and often found wanting.

Ashenden, like Maugham himself, is an author who accepts a role working for the Secret Service after he is informed that his profession allows him to hide in plain sight in Switzerland, ‘on the pretext that he was writing a book he could without attracting attention visit any neutral country.’<sup>99</sup> Built into the offer from “R.”, his contact in the Intelligence department, is the suggestion that his war work will be suitable material for his fiction. R. states this directly to him, and is in fact keen to impress the novelist with his own tales. He attempts to interest Ashenden with an apparently true story of a ‘yellow-haired lady’ and a stolen dispatch-case, but is disappointed in Ashenden’s incredulous response that such incidents are too hackneyed for the modern-day author; ‘we’ve written it in a thousand novels. Do you mean to say that life has only just caught up with us?’<sup>100</sup> R.’s only possible response to this is to assert that it is certainly true

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<sup>95</sup>Compton Mackenzie, *Water on the Brain* (London: Cassell, 1933).

<sup>96</sup>William Somerset Maugham, *Ashenden* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 109.

<sup>97</sup>Compton Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet* (London: Cassell, 1928), p. 34.

<sup>98</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 35.

<sup>99</sup>Maugham, p. 2.

<sup>100</sup>Maugham, p. 3.

and can be proven, but of course, prosaic truth is not an end in itself for the novelist, as Ashenden asserts:

if you can't do better than that in the secret service,' sighed Ashenden, 'I'm afraid that as a source of inspiration to the writer of fiction it's a washout. We really *can't* write that story much longer.<sup>101</sup>

The irony of this assertion is that it is placed at the very outset of the novel. It is a playful reference to what is to come, as well as being an example of what Bruce Merry has called 'the internal repudiation of genre.'<sup>102</sup> Maugham highlights both that he is working within a genre delineated by very clear boundaries founded on repetition and cliché, and that in reality this repetition and cliché often proves true to experience. This self-reflection on the nature of the genre and its relation to reality surfaces again as he muses that R. often deliberately styles his schemes after those found in fiction:

It had always seemed to Ashenden that R. had spent much of his spare time in reading detective fiction and especially when he was in a good humour he found a fantastic pleasure in aping the style of the shilling shocker.<sup>103</sup>

As a unique example of a genre, espionage fiction, and a profession, modern-day espionage, coming of age together,<sup>104</sup> Maugham's characterisation of R. is an illustration of the sense of life-imitating-art-imitating-life which engenders a slippage of the clear boundaries between the two which will recur throughout the life of the espionage novel. It is also perhaps a clue to what the *TLS* characterised as Maugham's 'not very great enthusiasm' for his subject. Such archly self-reflexive metacommentary could easily be misconstrued as an indication of a lack of commitment to the traditions of the genre.

Maugham himself does not make a deliberate effort to manipulate his material to conform to the thriller-reader's generic expectations of what "thrills" involve. Hannay and Drummond's contrived excitements mean that tedium is nothing more than an environment from which thrills can be established, but

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<sup>101</sup>Maugham, p. 4.

<sup>102</sup>Bruce Merry, *Anatomy of the Spy Thriller* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), pp. 158–60.

<sup>103</sup>Maugham, p. 112.

<sup>104</sup>For discussion of the relationship between espionage fiction and real life espionage, see: D. French, David French, 'Spy Fever in Britain, 1900-1915', *The Historical Journal*, 21.2 (1978), 355–370.; David Trotter, 'The Politics of Adventure in the Early British Spy Novel', *Intelligence and National Security*, 5.4 (1990), 30–54.; Nicholas Hiley, 'Decoding German Spies: British Spy Fiction 1908–18', *Intelligence and National Security*, 5.4 (1990), 55–79.

Ashenden's acknowledgement of boredom continues even as he undertakes his assignments. From the very beginning, we learn that involvement in an interesting scheme causes 'a pleasant exhilaration (for a great deal of his work was uncommonly dull).'<sup>105</sup> Later it is emphasised again that his 'existence was as orderly and monotonous as a city clerk's'<sup>106</sup> and attempts to relieve his boredom in his writing of 'long reports he was convinced no one read' was to receive 'a sharp reproof for his levity.'<sup>107</sup> On his final mission, finding himself in Russia on the eve of the Revolution, he cannot help wonder 'How many of these hotel bedrooms had he known since the beginning of the war, grand or shabby, in one place and one land after another.'<sup>108</sup> Evidently, the seriousness of the work is without question but is also entwined with its monotony. Other than in Davies' precise mapping in *The Riddle of the Sands*, which, it could be argued is more closely related with a need to demonstrate the plausibility of that novel's characters through the medium of unimpeachable technical proficiency than any demonstration about the true nature of espionage, *Ashenden* is the first notable example of the inextricable connection between "Intelligence" and rigour. Victory is won through the relentless and methodical application of observation, not the reliance on good fortune, strength and near-miraculous disguise which had heretofore been in the forefront of the genre. This sort of observation is made explicit as we learn that 'Ashenden was sick of the people who saw spies in every inoffensive passer-by and plots in the most innocent combination of circumstances.'<sup>109</sup> The sort of sensational events retold by R. undoubtedly occur in the course of Ashenden's assignments, but not as frequently as those external to the business imagine. This is borne out in the stories that make up the novel. He investigates a spy whose reports seem too good to be true, and indeed prove so; he accompanies a flamboyant hairless Mexican General to Italy who then proceeds to assassinate the wrong man due to mistaken identity; he deliberately gets to know a hillwalking English traitor and his German wife, but the traitor is caught and executed through no work of Ashenden's. Intrigue is pursued, but more often than not, dreary circumstance intervenes.

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<sup>105</sup>Maugham, p. 7.

<sup>106</sup>Maugham, p. 109.

<sup>107</sup>Maugham, p. 110.

<sup>108</sup>Maugham, p. 288.

<sup>109</sup>Maugham, p. 49.

Roger Waterlow, the protagonist of Compton Mackenzie's two serious espionage novels, is a naval officer cast adrift from his career by an overindulgence in alcohol. Unlike Ashenden, who is a writer co-opted into the war due to his talents, Waterlow actively seeks the chance to serve. Failing to secure a diminished naval role on a Q-ship after his disgrace, he is instead presented with the opportunity to work as the head of British Intelligence in the Aegean, answering in this case to "X". His job is to co-ordinate espionage and counter-espionage via locally recruited agents throughout his corner of the Mediterranean whilst working from an unnamed neutral Aegean nation (in reality, modelled so closely on Greece's situation in the First World War as to be indistinguishable). The actual plots of the Waterlow novels are not strikingly innovative as far as the espionage genre goes. In both, the overriding concern of the secret service in the Aegean is to prevent the local monarch, insultingly referred to as 'Tom Tiddler' from the children's game of the same name, from entering the war on the side of the Central Powers, and if possible, to come in with the *Entente*. In practice this simply leads to the kind of bluffs and double bluffs with which we are familiar. *Extremes Meet*, for example, concerns Waterlow's attempts to prevent documents being delivered from German agents to a submarine, so that the submarine can be delayed sufficiently to allow the British navy to arrive and sink it. The plot is of course complicated by personal relationships which insert themselves between Waterlow's plans and reality, as well as the unwieldiness of military bureaucracy and Secret Service methods. *The Three Couriers* sees Waterlow attempting, with mixed success, to prevent German military documents from leaving the country, either in the diplomatic bag of a starstruck Greek official accompanied by a Countess or in the hands of a naïve German clerk who quixotically squanders his own life savings in devoted service to the Fatherland.

Waterlow himself is presented as rather cynical and hard-boiled, and in self-reflection suggests that the sentimental or whimsical cracks in his emotional carapace lead only to trouble. In a moment of regret at being talked into his new position he reflects that 'It had been a mistake to let himself be captivated by the charming mysteriousness of X.'<sup>110</sup> This cynical attitude clearly has an influence on his feelings towards his work, and early in *Extremes Meet*

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<sup>110</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 17.

he muses that intelligence work itself is largely useless:

The V.A. thought that intelligence might help the Army at Salonica, but that the idea of it being any help to the Navy was ludicrous. He could hardly be blamed when one remembered the bilge that intelligence bureaux were pumping out all over the world in these hectic days.<sup>111</sup>

As with Ashenden, we see clearly that exposure to genuine espionage work has hardened Waterlow to its romance; he is under no illusions. However, as is generally the case with the hard-boiled archetype, it is in the weak moments of sentiment or whimsy that the underlying appeal and decency of the character are revealed. We witness this in Waterlow's teasing of his assistant's popinjay desire to gain a commission in the navy and in his use of the names of English poets as the code-names for his agents; Milton, Keats and Dryden become the names by which we know these characters, and we are informed that 'those resounding names concealed the identity of some queer scallywags.'<sup>112</sup> Thus, we are told how once Milton, forgetting his codename, and unable to contact his source, had spent 'All day long bolted in the privy with a loaded pistol each side of him on the seat.'<sup>113</sup> The resonance of the grandeur of poets is mixed with the slapstick of lavatorial imprisonment and the menace of loaded pistols, which in many ways represents the alchemy at work in both Maugham and Mackenzie's espionage novels. *The Three Couriers* insists on the continuation of this theme as at the outset we are presented with a secret telegram of the investigation into the suspicious figure of "Edward Dear":

*Edward Dear does not exist, clerk of French Vice-Consul at Vathy overheard girl address Theodore Ascarides as Teddie dear, T.D. reported as German agent under name Teddie Dear. Nothing further discovered against him.*<sup>114</sup>

Thus, both Waterlow's character, and the overall atmosphere of the novels, is one of insistent bathos. No matter how serious the work and resonant the consequences, the comic is never far from the surface.

Aside from the bathetic, the primary expression of the Waterlow novels is of the seediness and melancholy of the world that Waterlow is embroiled in. To

<sup>111</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 16.

<sup>112</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 21.

<sup>113</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 84.

<sup>114</sup>Compton Mackenzie, *The Three Couriers* (London: Cassell, 1929), p. 14.



an extent this is conveyed via environmental factors that serve to emphasise a sense of intractable moral turpitude. The heat of the country means that Waterlow's world is covered in layers of dust and sweat that infect all surfaces, and there are frequent references to the profound nagging discomfort of everyday life. We are introduced to Waterlow in a horse-drawn taxi, with 'a reek in his nostrils of sweaty harness,'<sup>115</sup> caught between battling a stinging fly and the scorching heat of the vehicle's upholstery in the sunlight, while *The Three Couriers* sees the headquarters of the agency relocated to an airless villa in which Waterlow's assistant is reduced to suffering the heat, naked but for a toga improvised from a bedsheet. Of course, these unpleasant environmental factors act as mirrors to Waterlow's continual involvement in the eddies of deceit that swirl around him. His agents, often described with disgust, such as one who is 'so gross an accumulation of musk-drenched perspiring human flesh,'<sup>116</sup> lie to him and exaggerate the importance of their information, while his movements are constantly monitored by agents of the local secret police, whilst he is charged with spinning webs of his own as well as attempting to untangle those spun by his opposite numbers.

The major sub-plot of *Extremes Meet* concerns an English diplomat, Arthur Radcliffe, who becomes involved in an ill-advised affair with a dancing girl of uncertain nationality, Queenie Walters. He resolves to leave his wife for her and attempts to get Waterlow involved in procuring a passport to allow her to travel to England. Meanwhile his wife is carrying on a flirtation with Waterlow himself, as well as Paul Drimys, aide-de-camp to the local monarch. Queenie is a character of a very recognisable archetype within the genre in this period; the underworld ingénue, actually with a parallel in Maugham's novel in the figure of Giulia Lazzari. Inevitably, Queenie is charmingly innocent and yet marked with years of hard living at the hands of unsavoury men; she is a dancer and so exists in the shadowy economy of marginal legitimacy of dressing rooms and boarding houses run by weary but formidable madams. It is an archetype pitched perfectly in these novels to soften the heart of the stiff-backed conformist Englishmen who populate the stories. Queenie bedazzles Arthur and also has a profound effect on Waterlow, whilst Giulia Lazzari nearly has a similar impact on Ashenden, until she asks for the return of an expensive wrist-

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<sup>115</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 10.

<sup>116</sup>Mackenzie, *The Three Couriers*, p. 117.

watch from her lover whom she previously refused to betray. While in another episode of *Ashenden*, an extensive aside is given over to the regretful reminiscence of a British Ambassador for his doomed love affair with a French acrobat from a similar *milieu*.

The characteristics of the underworld ingénue are uniquely appropriate for the espionage novel in this stage of its development. Firstly, they are of dubious or multiple nationality and as such are forced to exist on the edges of society and without the certainty of its protections. In this liminal zone of questionable legality, with the smatterings of languages picked up from touring the nightclubs (and bedrooms) of Europe, they are prey to the scheming of hustlers and pimps, forced into personal and professional positions against their will and for the profit of others. According to Waterlow's card index, Queenie is 'of German origin possibly, carrying stolen passport of Maud Moffat, English variety artiste. Description: slim, very fair, blue eyes, pale, delicate, speaks German, Italian, French and English',<sup>117</sup> and lives in constant fear of "Zozo", her former lover and, in all probability, pimp. As fiction reveals that espionage is increasingly to be conducted on the margins of decent society and in the cracks that form between nations, between classes and between genders, it is obvious that women such as these, who survive by inhabiting these cracks, are ideally positioned to play a central role. Indeed, the tradition stems from reality, taking inspiration from Mata Hari, whose alleged spying in her role as an internationally-renowned exotic dancer led to her execution by a French firing squad in 1917. At this time Mata Hari was one of the most prominent examples of public interest in the business of espionage, and her reputation as a notorious *femme fatale* was unquestioned, whilst accounts such as Ferdinand Tuohy's *The Secret Corps* singled out her exploits as "the most spectacular, if far from the most effective of spies".<sup>118</sup>

Certainly Waterlow is aware of the trope established around this female archetype, and finds himself questioning his judgement where she is concerned:

Was she lying? Was she acting? It seemed impossible that she was not sincere, and yet should not he for that very reason suspect her more? Was not

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<sup>117</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 44.

<sup>118</sup>Tuohy, p. 22.

perhaps experience beginning to deceive him? One could become too sceptical and scepticism carried too far turned to credulousness. He had come to believe by now that the dangerous female spy who lured men to ruin was a myth. But was she?<sup>119</sup>

In the character of Queenie, we find the tensions inherent in constant vigilance becoming more problematic. Waterlow's judgement leads him to sympathise with her, but his training means that by definition he should mistrust his sympathy, and yet his rejection of commonplace sensational tropes – a quality which is essential in his adroit management of the information that flows from his agents and across his desk – means that he must also mistrust that mistrust. Rudderless, then, in his uncertainty, Waterlow can in the final instance only rely on his judgement, the fallibility of which he is acutely aware.

The German documents which are the nominal MacGuffin of *Extremes Meet*, acting to ensure the narrative constantly moves forward, but in the end of little actual consequence, are eventually let out of Waterlow's grasp, and find their way to the submarine lying offshore. Despite his strenuous efforts to acquire them, he takes this in his stride, admitting 'I can't blame anybody but myself; and I'm not sure that I can blame myself very much. Things just went wrong.'<sup>120</sup> Despite his card index, his agents and his intricate deceptions, Waterlow cannot bring about the desired result and it is through no real fault of his own; the forces at work can be nudged in a desired direction, but not driven to a goal. It is a reiteration of his earlier sighing contempt for the fruitlessness of his work. However, the real significance of the final act of the novel is the way in which Waterlow's personal entanglements become entwined with the strands of espionage narrative which are being woven into a climactic scene. Queenie is under his instruction to lure the German envoy, von Rangel, to a specific inn, where a trap is laid. In return, she is to be given a new passport and free passage to England. Meanwhile Georgie Radcliffe is at the same inn with Drimys and upon realising this she is instantly and deeply skeptical of Waterlow's intentions, refusing to believe that his and Queenie's presence is purely in the innocent pursuit of espionage. Waterlow's final completion of his promise to Queenie is formed by a series of minor rebellions against his

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<sup>119</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 178.

<sup>120</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 299.

position, against the limitations of his class and against his incidental collusion in the circumstances which have trapped Queenie in her seedy misery. He expresses his desire to protect her as a desperation to uphold values he fears are already lost. It is in fact a mirror of Bulldog Drummond's pastoral nostalgia, as though sending Queenie back to the innocence of his own childhood can somehow restore that innocence to Waterlow. Ultimately, his most profound rebellion is against his own vigilance. He wallows in the temporary mental calm granted by his decision:

it was a relief to be able to listen idly to the snatches of scenes she evoked from her past, to listen idly as one might listen to the cheeping of birds in a garden without having to construct out of such cheeping a case for the files, a record for the card index, without having to compress such information into a telegram or warn the world of the danger of this small spark amid a mundane conflagration.<sup>121</sup>

To consciously demilitarise his choices is to grant a space for relaxation of thought without the need to second guess or double bluff. However, in his role, such a space can only ever be temporary. Georgie has already admonished him for his desire to lapse from vigilance, reminding him that 'the difference between you and me, Roger, is that you think secret service something apart from ordinary life, whereas I know perfectly well that all life is secret service.'<sup>122</sup> The implication is that her way-of-life, of bedroom scheming and double dealing, equips her more completely for a state of perpetual alertness, whilst Waterlow is only a dilettante in such affairs, as proven by his decision to take Platonic satisfaction in aiding Queenie rather than pursuing further intrigue in a real affair with Georgie. Nevertheless the return to vigilance cannot be postponed indefinitely. Even Waterlow's desired reward for his efforts, a Q-Ship, a civilian vessel loaded with hidden armaments and luring warships into her sights, would represent a return to the constant tensions of deceit.

The Waterlow novels are more broadly picaresque than the Ashenden stories, and this undoubtedly has much to do with the hazy brightness of oppressive Mediterranean summer as compared to the softened light and sharp edges of northern Europe; indeed, the texts never resemble one another so

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<sup>121</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 307.

<sup>122</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 289.

much as when Ashenden is travelling through Italy with the hairless General. Nevertheless, the sharp tang of worldly, justified, cynicism haunts the fictionalised exploits of both agents. These are men who are inserted by war into the underbellies of societies, and learn that what they find there only confirms their worst suspicions about human nature and conduct. The naivety of those less able to detect the grimy truth and glimpses of innocence in the murk serve only as temporary postponements of the inevitable reassertion of Ashenden and Waterlow's assumptions.

In *Ashenden*, R. astutely summarises that eponymous character's emotional response to the job he has been given:

I've not yet made up my mind whether the best men for this kind of job are those who do it with passion or those who keep their heads. Some of them are filled with hatred for the people we're up against and when we down them it gives them a sort of satisfaction like satisfying a personal grudge. Of course they're very keen on their work. You're different, aren't you? You look at it like a game of chess and you don't seem to have any feeling one way or the other. I can't quite make it out. Of course for some sort of jobs it's just what one wants.<sup>123</sup>

The suggestion is that Ashenden's emotional distance, perhaps his extra stage of removal from the events that he witnesses and is involved in, is what allows him to succeed in his job. Throughout the episodes contained within the novel, he is frequently emotionally moved, but rarely succumbs to that emotion and thus is rarely distracted from the path towards completing his missions. He feels a twinge of compassion and understanding for Chandra Lal, the Indian freedom fighter he is asked to capture; he feels sympathy for Giulia Lazzari, Lal's lover, who in the final reckoning refuses to betray him; he feels a strange admiration for Mr. Harrington's doomed pig-headedness over a batch of laundry which results in his death in revolutionary Russia. In each case, though, Ashenden's emotional weakness is overcome by the reality of the situation, or evaporates in the atmosphere of futility that pervades the novel. He agrees that Lal must be stopped, despite his admirable qualities; Giulia Lazzari reveals that her baser urges are stronger than her grand sentiments in asking for the return of an expensive gift from her lover's corpse, while Mr. Harrington's doomed but noble

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<sup>123</sup>Maugham, p. 130.

obstinacy ultimately serves as the novel's epigraph: 'Mr. Harrington had not let his washing go.'<sup>124</sup>

In Waterlow's case, he is fiercely protective of his own emotionally distant demeanour. This prevents his submission to the emotional turmoil of his environment:

Such demonstrative emotion always made him angry, because he dreaded his own surrender to it one day under the stress of a climate and scenery that with every year strip something from the Nordic man and send him a little nearer back to that Mediterranean culture from which perhaps he originally came.<sup>125</sup>

The episode with Queenie is a rare lapse into decision-making influenced by emotion rather than through pure reason, dangerously close to the behaviour of 'Weak young diplomats with pretty little blonde wives [who] should really not be employed so near the zone of war.'<sup>126</sup> Emotional connections, whether they be directly to other men and women or more abstractly, to nation or ideology, only serve to introduce fallibility. The point is proven in the fate of Hermann Strauss, the German clerk press ganged into carrying papers by mule through central Europe to Berlin. His emotional patriotism is manipulated by German Intelligence to press him into service and by local middlemen who fleece him for his life savings. He is easily apprehended by Waterlow's agents, and 'left nothing but a myopic little man (...) blinking pathetically and begging that somehow or other his disgraceful failure to serve the Fatherland might be for ever hidden.'<sup>127</sup>

### Conclusion

This chapter began with an examination of "The Myth of the War", and its relation to the literary output of Britain in the twenties, suggesting that an academic consensus was produced by an oversimplified historical narrative which was fortified by an almost deliberate ignorance of the popular culture which operated outside of the limits usually sketched by academic considerations. The validity of this identification of a national-historical moment of disenchantment which was demonstrated through a sudden outpouring of

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<sup>124</sup>Maugham, p. 326.

<sup>125</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 24.

<sup>126</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 47.

<sup>127</sup>Mackenzie, *The Three Couriers*, p. 299.

disillusioned literature is without question. However, as this chapter argued, the popularity of mass cultural works such as the *Bulldog Drummond* series demonstrates an ongoing engagement with the immediate past which belies attempts to characterise the Great War as a distinct and irreversible break in 'a seamless, purposeful "history" involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future.'<sup>128</sup> In this engagement, the *Bulldog Drummond* series seems to embody Fredric Jameson's suggestion with regards to popular literature:

anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness, so that the works of mass culture, even if their function lies in the legitimization of the existing order-or some worse one-cannot do their job without deflecting in the latter's service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity, to which they can therefore, no matter in how distorted a fashion, be found to have given voice.<sup>129</sup>

In fact, it is perhaps less equivocal than Jameson's inflections suggest. These novels contain not only a partial glimpse of utopia through illusory resolutions, but also statements acknowledging the damage caused by the paradoxes of power which those resolutions reinforce. Such statements are infrequent and fleeting, but are certainly present. Drummond himself is a damaged product of the trenches, unable to readjust to normal civilian life and attempting to negate his purposelessness by recreating the situations through which he has both suffered and prospered. Meanwhile, his basic assumptions about society, whilst they have survived, have been confused by his confrontation with "the real". He can no longer be blind to the plight of less fortunate men around him; these men have been his comrades, and now, in his conception of the situation, they fall victim to the silver tongued scheming of devious men manipulating the great forces of the age. Nevertheless, his revelation as to the suffering around him does not lead to automatic enlightenment. Instead, he has recognised the symptoms and identified the causes, but fallen upon dangerous cures. He is representative, in Hobsbawm's words, of the 'little man' in society, feeling powerless in the face of the forces he cannot properly comprehend. He is thus representative of the danger embodied in the reactionary impulse, popular

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<sup>128</sup>Fussell, p. 21.

<sup>129</sup>Fredric Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', *Social Text*, 1.1 (1979), 130–148 (p. 144).

culture in which one can detect the first shoots of the great evils the next decade would witness in full bloom.

The espionage fictions of Maugham and Mackenzie, however, demonstrate that the reactionary, perhaps proto-fascist stance represented by Drummond is not inherent to the structure of the sub-genre of espionage fiction, even in its fledgling phase. While all three primarily address the issue of counter-espionage, that is, the defence of the realm, and as such to some extent share a common interest in the preservation of the existing order, it does not follow that a reactionary world view proves necessary. While the craze of post-1928 war-books illustrated the futility and disillusion engendered by direct conflict in the trenches, these first significant post-1928 espionage novels illustrated the subtlety which would eventually become the trademark of espionage fiction while drawing attention uncomfortably to the minor, hidden, futility and spiritual disillusion which provided the terrain in which such dealings could be committed. For while British public schoolboys returned from the Western Front to write the novels and memoirs that would draw the nation's attention to the unsuitability of many of the principles underwriting the stability of British society to modernity, Maugham and Mackenzie returned from their clandestine postings to draw attention to the endemic exploitation of an invisible underclass of precarious migrant labour which was sufficiently vulnerable to be exploited while also occupying ideal positions from which to do the work of gathering intelligence. Furthermore, Maugham and Mackenzie independently express misgivings not only with the undirected international structures which hold this underclass in their unfortunate position, but also with the intentional structures of British Imperialism which their service inherently supports. Ashenden cannot condemn Chandra Lal's desire for freedom, and in fact 'can't help being impressed by a man who had the courage to take on almost single-handed the whole British power in India.'<sup>130</sup> Waterlow, meanwhile, in a feverish bout of truth-telling, asserts 'It's perfectly clear to me at this moment that we have no right whatever to make the people here go to war with Germany. All this infernal imperialism is wrong. And I know it's all wrong.'<sup>131</sup> These concerns bring into question the legitimacy of the British Establishment itself. Involvement in war and coming face-to-face with the back

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<sup>130</sup>Maugham, p. 129.

<sup>131</sup>Mackenzie, *The Three Couriers*, p. 78.



room machinery involved in the perpetuation of power cause both characters to question not only their own involvement in the cause, but the cause itself. Perhaps this is an early indication of the risk of sympathy arising from too much time spent amongst the enemy which would become so prominent in Cold War espionage fiction, but it can also be seen as representing the reality of interacting directly with the individuals whom one's decisions affect. I discussed earlier how objectivity is proposed as a prerequisite for efficient espionage work, and how both Ashenden and Waterlow struggle in the contrast between their pursuit of this quality and their ceaseless impulse to treat other people as genuine individuals as opposed to the monstrous archetypes Drummond considers to be ranged against him and the well of pure emotional force from which he draws his strength.

In one major sense Maugham and Mackenzie shared a concern with Sapper despite the fundamental incompatibility of their more authentic tales with his sensational ones. Ashenden and Waterlow are ordinary men who find themselves in positions which continually bring to their attention the arbitrariness with which violence can interrupt any unwitting person's life. Ashenden is involved in the hairless Mexican's assassination of the wrong man and Mr. Harrington's senseless murder in the chaos of revolution. Waterlow himself imposes involvement in the War on Queenie and is conscious of 'this slim golden girl on his conscience,'<sup>132</sup> as well as being full of sympathy for poor Hermann Strauss, an innocent caught up in events much greater than he is built for. As Waterlow notes, normality was infected with war to the extent that 'A knife in the back was not such an entirely ridiculous notion.'<sup>133</sup> For the most part, Drummond imposes himself on other people, and is not an unwitting or passive recipient of violence, but is nevertheless conscious that 'people have fallen in front of tube trains before now; people have been killed by a passing car.'<sup>134</sup> This imminence and immanence of danger is a hallmark of the modern thriller, and is entwined with the sense of narrative excess noted earlier, wherein reality outstrips fiction to the extent that it appears too far-fetched to be plausible storytelling. Ashenden cannot accept R.'s suggested spy yarns as possible material for adaptation because they exceed the bounds of fiction, and yet they

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<sup>132</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 308.

<sup>133</sup>Mackenzie, *Extremes Meet*, p. 82.

<sup>134</sup>Sapper, 'The Third Round', p. 416.

come direct from the source. When we learn that Drummond is an authority on 'things which would tax the incredulity of the most hardened reader of sensational fiction,'<sup>135</sup> we can accept that the omnipresent Damoclean threat is a fictive device to heighten the sense of danger in the narrative; the same sense of threat which chased Richard Hannay from his flat to the Highlands of Scotland. After all, the Drummond stories have been, as Colin Watson puts it, 'vigorously purged of likelihood.'<sup>136</sup> However, when reality is rejected as material for fiction as too fictive, as in Ashenden's case, it suggests perhaps a real which has exceeded the normal margins of experience and passed into a state beyond the everyday comprehension of the ordinary man., This is a description which could with equanimity be applied both to the experience of heightened volatility and accelerated change that marked the early part of the twentieth century and to the specific experience of the Great War which marked so indelibly the lives of so many.

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<sup>135</sup>Sapper, 'The Third Round', p. 427.

<sup>136</sup>Watson, p. 65.

## Chapter 2:

### Varieties of Anti-Capitalist Literary Criticism in the 1930s: The Scrutiny

#### Movement and Left Review

'Capitalism can no longer make use of the best fruits of culture, and the result is an increasing output of second-rate work in literature, journalism and entertainment.'<sup>1</sup>

-Cecil Day Lewis, *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*

'A Brechtian maxim: "Don't start from the good old things, but the bad new ones."'<sup>2</sup>

-Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*

#### Introduction

The contested domain of literary culture in the 1930s produced two prominent and emblematic journals which took on the project of developing literary criticism as a formal discipline and in so doing explored the relationship between popular fiction and literary production. These were *Scrutiny* and *Left Review*, which both expressly yoked their interpretations of cultural production to a project for political and cultural change. As David Margolies has argued, 'The crisis of the thirties made traditional notions of literature and criticism irrelevant. It was no so much that they were "wrong" or even decadent as that they had no relation to the overwhelming issues of the day.'<sup>3</sup> In this context, a primarily political theory of culture was demanded, and these groups rose to meet that demand, however, Raymond Williams has written,

in the Thirties, when it seemed essential to decide on the value of existing bourgeois art in the age of the revolutionary proletariat (...) Behind that immediate and particular problem there lay a more general one that still bothers us. Can literature participate directly in social and political action if it is truly literature?<sup>4</sup>

This chapter examines how these journals, at the vanguard of establishing new

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<sup>1</sup> 'Introduction', in *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*, ed. by C. Day Lewis (London: F. Muller Ltd., 1937), pp. 11–18. p35

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Conversations with Brecht', in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 105–21., p121

<sup>3</sup> David Margolies, 'Left Review and Left Literary Theory', in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*, ed. by Jon Clark and others (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), pp. 67–82. p67

<sup>4</sup> Frank Kermode, *History and Value: The Clarendon Lectures and the Northcliffe Lectures, 1987* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)., p86

criteria for literary criticism, were too preoccupied by this question to recognise the value of mass cultural products to contribute to the social change they desired. To this end, it analyses how their respective projects mediated the stock response of literary critics to popular literature in general, and to thrillers in particular, and why in large part their responses were structurally unable to recognise the complexities, ambiguities and potentialities which were present in these forms. This is followed by a discussion of the continuities between these seemingly antagonistic interpretations of culture before concluding with a discussion of alternative critical strategies which were present but underemphasised in this period.

### Scrutiny

#### Minority Culture

In line with the prevailing winds of the first half of the twentieth century, which saw the proliferation of manifestos of every shade, *Scrutiny* announced itself with just such a deliberate statement of intent. The first volume carried the journal's own manifesto, and later volumes played host to debates about how this was to be applied. The overriding rationale behind the journal was presented in the opening few lines:

The general dissolution of standards is a commonplace. Many profess to believe (though fewer seem to care) that the end of Western civilization is in sight (...) Those who are aware of the situation will be concerned to cultivate awareness, and will be actively concerned for standards. A review is necessary that combines criticism of literature with criticism of extra-literary activities.<sup>5</sup>

At its core, this justification stems from a perception of imminent, immanent crisis; "the end of Western civilization". This was a common perception in the thirties; Richard Overly has stated that it was both a general and permanent feature of the period, 'a promiscuous and enduring hallmark of the two decades that separated the first great war from the second.'<sup>6</sup> In this context, one's personal interpretation of what the precise eschatology of Western civilization entailed was derived from one's stance with regard to the competing "-isms"

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<sup>5</sup> Editorial, 'Scrutiny: A Manifesto', *Scrutiny*, 1.1 (1932), 2–7. p.2

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Overly, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilisation ; 1919 - 1939* (London: Penguin Books, 2010). p14

which swarmed to prominence in the period. Some saw the threat as coming from the mobilisation of the working classes incited by the Soviet Union, others feared the rise of the militarised mob by Fascism; Hitler and Mussolini abroad, Oswald Mosley and the Blackshirts at home. In this climate, dubious Cassandras prospered and the figures such as Oswald Spengler and his theory of cyclical historical inevitability in his work *The Decline of the West* rose to prominence as their gloomy prophecies encapsulated the *zeitgeist*. As we shall see, *Scrutiny's* version of this perspective was broadly a synthesis of all of the above, brought together under an umbrella of mistrust of "progress" and a distaste for modernity in general.

*Scrutiny* was established in 1932 by scholars working at Cambridge University who were keen to move beyond the traditional methods and structures of teaching at the university, and to promote the study of English Literature, separate from the curriculum of Classics and Ancient Languages, as a modern and unique subject, inspired by the methods of I.A. Richards. As such, much of the drive behind the journal came from a commitment to the promotion of a specific variety of appreciation of literature.<sup>7</sup> The manifesto described this kind of appreciation as a method not simply for appreciating art, but also for creating the best kind of individuals:

it is only a small minority for whom the arts are something more than a luxury product, who believe, in fact, that they are "the store-house of recorded values" and, in consequence, that there is a necessary relationship between the quality of an individual's response to art and his general fitness for a humane existence.<sup>8</sup>

This insistence on the centrality of an individual's sensibility was fleshed out in the early works of two of its most prominent contributors, F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, the partnership at the centre of the group who established the journal. Together, working in a theoretical terrain firmly within the Arnoldian tradition of literary and cultural criticism, the Leavises promoted a specific definition of what was meant by "culture" and its role in the history of civilization; not simply a collection of

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<sup>7</sup> For a full discussion of the founding of *Scrutiny* and of the Leavises, see Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'* (London: NLB, 1979). and Sean Matthews, "'Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth...': *Scrutiny* 1932-1953", in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> 'Scrutiny: A Manifesto'. p5

artefacts, but rather the “store house of recorded values” as referenced in the manifesto, representing an unbroken continuity stretching back through past societies and preserved by a minority capable of recognising and appreciating it. This was how F.R. Leavis addressed the question of what is meant by “culture” in his pamphlet, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*. In his definition, this ‘very small minority’ and their capacity for ‘the discerning appreciation of art and literature’, are the only method of preserving the highest cultural achievements made by their predecessors:

Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go, that the centre is here rather than there.<sup>9</sup>

The implications of this statement are clear. Judgements of value on cultural objects made by those qualified to do so are deemed both sufficient and necessary in order to establish the criteria whereby a society endures through the passage of time.

In this formulation, the two elements of the pamphlet’s title are growing ever more inimical to one another. “Minority Culture”, the through-line which binds society’s future (and present) to its past, is assaulted by the upstart “Mass Civilisation.” Revealed in this, too, is a fundamental axiom of the *Scrutiny* group, the coming of this “Mass Civilisation”, broadly defined as industrialisation or mechanisation, but more subtly involving the entire process whereby “the mass” becomes a political unit distinct from its earlier designation as “the mob”. That which Leavis, and *Scrutiny*, present as being carelessly discarded in this process is what is described as an ‘organic community,’ illustrated elsewhere by reference to the cultural productions of historical rural life:

Folk songs, folk dances, Cotswold cottages and handicraft products are signs and expressions of something more: an art of life, a way of living, ordered and patterned, involving social arts, codes of intercourse and a responsive adjustment, growing out of immemorial, to the natural environment and the rhythm of the year.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1930)., p1

<sup>10</sup> F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1933). pp1-2

This historical community is “organic” in that it is both natural and unified, as opposed to mass civilisation, which is manufactured and fragmented, reprising the now-familiar sociological *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* distinction. This organic community, as conceived by Leavis, is an imaginary, pastoral repository for the values deemed desirable in society, constructed retrospectively as an inverse mirror of industrialism, and acts as a shibboleth throughout the *Scrutiny* movement’s attempts to construct a critique of modernity around the discipline of literary criticism, which is to occupy the previously absent centre of British intellectual culture.<sup>11</sup>

### *Fiction and the Reading Public*

Foremost in the application of the *Scrutiny* principles was Q.D. Leavis, half of the Leavis partnership at the centre of the group, who most wholeheartedly applied these theories directly to the contemporary fiction of 1932, both in her thesis, which was published as *Fiction and the Reading Public*, which has been called ‘the canonical text of the movement,’<sup>12</sup> and in her further writings on other contemporary fiction in the pages of *Scrutiny*.

The framework of *Fiction and the Reading Public* is presented as ‘anthropological’. As such, her judgements on the state of contemporary literature are supported by a web of anecdotage; reported quotes from librarians and responses from novelists to a questionnaire that Leavis herself distributed. Nevertheless, despite her self-conscious claim, ‘I have not set out to state a case,’<sup>13</sup> the content of the ‘anthropological’ element of her thesis is fabricated entirely in support of a core argument, and basic assumption, that ‘novel-reading is now largely a drug habit,’<sup>14</sup> while the support for this theory is given as ‘information volunteered by a public librarian that many take out two or three novels by Edgar Wallace a week, and the only other books they borrow are “Sapper’s” [sic] or other “thrillers.”’<sup>15</sup> Popular fiction is the drug, and the thriller is the most grievous strain.

The blame for the domination of reading habits by commercial fiction is

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the absent centre, see Perry Anderson, ‘Components of the National Culture’, *New Left Review*, 1.50 (1968), 3–57.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, Iain, ‘F.R. Leavis, the Scrutiny Movement and the Crisis’, in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*, ed. by Jon Clark and others (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), pp. 37–66., p49

<sup>13</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932)., p.xvi

<sup>14</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 7.

pointed squarely at industrialism, a synonym for mass production, as a unique aspect of modernity. In the first place, industrialism is presented as marching in lock-step with capitalism, characterised specifically by Leavis as 'Big Business'. which works to mass produce novels, and in the process, destroys 'among the masses a desire to read anything which by the widest stretch could be included in the classification "literature"',<sup>16</sup> commodifying literary production into an equivalent to other consumer products, such as 'cheap crockery, strings of beads, lamp-shades, and toffee, toys, soap, and flower-bulbs.' The mass production of novels is explained to be 'creating cheap mechanical responses and throwing their weight on the side of social, national, and herd prejudices.'<sup>17</sup> Separately, in an article in *Scrutiny*, she is clear that progress, industrialism and capitalism cannot be separated and contribute to the conversion of literature into commodity: 'The radical fact is the advance of civilization. The supply of literature has become an industry subject to the same conditions as the supply of any other commodity.'<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, industrialism is to blame for the increased specialisation involved in the atomistic division of labour represented by modern Fordist methods, providing a catalyst in the endemic of work-time boredom arising in workers unfulfilled in overly specific and repetitive tasks. Thus, Leavis states, 'It is generally recognised that the universal need to read something when not actively employed has been created by the conditions of modern life.'<sup>19</sup> The core argument of this line of reasoning is both reasonable and laudable; the conditions of capitalist production tend towards an undermining of the dignity of labour for the working classes, and in an ideal situation, labour itself would be a fulfilling activity, integrated into the daily life of the individual rather than a distinct portion of what is essentially "non-time" given over work. However, the argument as Leavis presents it is rather more sinister. It is not only the unfulfilling labour time which is undesirable, but also the by-product created by this temporal bureaucratic rationalisation: leisure time. When Leavis states elegiacally that 'The old order made reading to prevent boredom unnecessary',<sup>20</sup> she argues instead for a form of labour which is fulfilling

<sup>16</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> F. R. Leavis, 'The Literary Racket', *Scrutiny*, 1.2 (1932), 166–68 (p. 168).

<sup>19</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 48.



because it is all-consuming. This argument is made because, in Leavis' conception of the development of popular literature, it is this leisure time which has 'called forth a new kind of literature - the magazine and the corresponding bestseller, designed to be read in the face of lassitude and nervous fatigue.'<sup>21</sup>

Leisure time, of course, includes the freedom of the individual to choose how that time is spent, and Leavis is right to note that this is not a straightforward, neutral, freedom. Rather, it is one which is enmeshed within a complex, compromised, web of ideological and economic factors. However, the supposed antidote to this complexity is presented as a return to the kind of "organic community" which the *Scrutiny* group valorized. For her presentation of this alternative, she puts forward the argument that previous structures of popular consumption were inherently superior to modern mass culture simply in their elimination of choice. In the seventeenth century, as Leavis constructs it, the masses - or their early modern equivalent - 'had to take the same amusements as their betters (...) Happily they had no choice.'<sup>22</sup> This is, for her, an unqualified positive. There is no hierarchical cultural stratification into "brows"; instead there is a unified national culture and concomitant living folk-history. Aside from displaying an ignorance of actual alternative popular cultures in her chosen period,<sup>23</sup> as well as a misplaced nostalgic idealism, this position is fundamentally tyrannical. It posits an authoritarian cultural monosemy, policed by the cultural authority of the "betters", the cultured minority. In this it met Karl Bracher's characterisation of thirties authoritarianism:

[which] lived not so much by a blueprint of the future as by its great anti-positions which promised a kind of salvation from the evils of modernization (...) The other basic characteristic was the impressive certainty of a firm hierarchy of values.<sup>24</sup>

A by-product of the insistence on lost cultural unity was that the question of "brows" became a crucial one in the works of both Leavises. It was not simply a

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<sup>21</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 49.

<sup>22</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> 'If Mrs. Leavis would extend her acquaintance with the underworld of Elizabethan and seventeenth century fiction, with such phenomena as the vulgarizations of *Don Quixote*, or the pornographic tales, or the inane chap-book redactions of romances, she might perhaps still insist upon her general thesis; but she would probably not present it in so extremely antithetical a form.' Ernest Bernbaum, 'Recent Works on Prose Fiction before 1800', *Modern Language Notes*, 48.6 (1933), 370-378.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The Age of Ideologies: A History of Political Thought in the Twentieth Century*, trans. by Ewald Osers (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 98.

case of a dislike for the mass products of "lowbrow" culture. Instead it was a rejection of the entire process of classification which represented the escape of the masses from the authority of the cultured minority. In this formulation, the cultural separation of the "brows" essentially contributes to the isolation of each from the other and by extension their irreconcilable hostility to one another:

the middlebrow is anxious to get the best of both worlds while the lowbrow is concerned only to speak of the other with sufficient "knowledgableness" (as the advertising agents call it) to be able to deny its value.<sup>25</sup>

The organic community is thus rendered ever more distant and irretrievable as the members of each "brow" are ensconced ever further into the division set aside for them.

The "highbrow" is understood as unnecessarily and deliberately obtuse as a wilful insulation against interest from the broad mass of the people. F.R. Leavis described the term as replacing 'conventional respect for traditional standards,'<sup>26</sup> and implicated the separation of the "highbrow" from the rest of culture in the increasing marginalisation of minority culture: 'The minority is being cut off as never before from the powers that rule the world.'<sup>27</sup> Implicit in such a statement is once more the authoritarian edge of the Leavisite project; desire for access to, and influence over, power.

Meanwhile in this conception, the "middlebrow", embodied in the recommendations of book-societies, was a special target for attack, as it represented pseudo-Literature, borrowing elements from genuine Literature but wrapping them up in unchallenging packaging; 'readers are left with the agreeable sensation of having improved themselves without incurring fatigue.'<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, crucial to the Leavises distaste for the stratification of culture is their stress that the modern "lowbrow" culture, i.e. mass culture, is not a genuine popular culture. Instead a genuine popular culture would be along the lines of the folk-culture outlined previously, of folks songs, folk dances and handicrafts. F.R. Leavis argues that this genuine popular culture, which previously existed but no longer does, belongs to the pastoral ideal which modernised society has cast aside:

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<sup>25</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> F. R. Leavis, 'What's Wrong with Criticism?', *Scrutiny*, 1.2 (1932), 132–43 (p. 135).

<sup>27</sup> F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, p. 37.

when England had a popular culture, the structure, the framework, of it was a stylization, so to speak, of economic necessities; based, it might fairly be said, on the "methods of production," was an art of living, involving codes, developed in ages of continuous experience, of relations between man and man, and man and the environment in its seasonal rhythm. This culture the progress of the nineteenth century destroyed,<sup>29</sup>

Again, this argument returns to the notion of the organic community. The lost popular culture proposed is that naturally arising from the working life of man and his relationship with his environment; it is a deterministic by-product of what Leavis construes as a kind of natural order. "Lowbrow" culture, on the other hand, as presented in *Fiction and the Reading Public* is that domain of drug-habit commodity previously indicated. In a separate essay for *Scrutiny*, Q.D. Leavis baldly states that the preservation of "serious" literature should take absolute precedence over any concession to entertainment: 'The case for a literature of entertainment that is distinct from Literature has yet to be put convincingly. But most people I suppose would be prepared to agree as a start that it must not interfere with or militate against serious literature.'<sup>30</sup>

While all three of the identified "brows" are inherently products of the general phenomenon of mass culture, it is the lowbrow which is the clear signifier of its progression. Lowbrow culture is the most straightforwardly novel machine product in the sense of industrial production methods identified by the Leavises. The formation of a lowbrow praxis for the production of culture results in a sloughing-off of the other categories further up the hierarchy. The middlebrow and the highbrow are formed from the surviving fragments which are not able to be assimilated by the process of the mass production of culture. In a Leavisite framework, this new cultural strata excludes, by its nature, all of the elements of traditional culture which they are interested in preserving:

it is vain to resist the triumph of the machine. It is equally vain to console us with the promise of a "mass culture" that shall be utterly new. It would, no doubt, be possible to argue that such a "mass culture" might be better than the culture we are losing, but it would be futile; the "utterly new" surrenders everything that can interest us.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> F. R. Leavis, 'Under Which King, Bezonian?', *Scrutiny*, 1.3 (1932), 205–21 (p. 208).

<sup>30</sup> Q. D. Leavis, 'Entertainment Literature : Review of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* by Robert Graves', *Scrutiny*, 5.3 (1936), 300–301 (p. 300).

<sup>31</sup> F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, p. 31.

What the “brow” model precludes, and the “organic community” model implicitly proposes, is a fixed structure of society dictated by the calendar and the land, with space for a kind of natural aristocracy of enlightened literary men, whose sensitivity raises them above the permanent positions occupied by the mass of society. It is an idealised rural England ruled over by Philosopher Kings with the Leavises at the top table.

### The Politics of *Scrutiny*

Despite the inherently political nature of their critique of society, when it came to the issue of political engagement, the avowed position of *Scrutiny* was to take no position, despite the fact that, as Iain Wright indicates, 'Leavis was always and primarily a political writer, most of all when he claimed not to be. His work is of a piece and serves one end - a sustained half century's propaganda campaign for an idiosyncratic and pessimistic version of classical nineteenth century liberalism.'<sup>32</sup> In the essay, “Under Which King, Bezonian?” which was the most extended explicit engagement with politics made by the journal in the thirties, F.R. Leavis stated that ‘to identify *Scrutiny* with a social, economic or political creed or platform would be to compromise and impede its special function.’<sup>33</sup> This was a response to the suggestion that the journal should be clearer on its alignment with organised movements, specifically with Marxism. Indeed, in the early numbers of the journal, it is with some variety of Marxism that *Scrutiny* was most directly connected politically. Leavis himself admitted his attraction to the broad impulse behind it:

Let me say, then, that I agree with the Marxist to the extent of believing that some form of economic communism to be inevitable and desirable, in the sense that it is to this that a power-economy of its very nature points, and only by a deliberate and intelligent working towards it can civilization be saved from disaster. (The question is, communism of what kind? Is the machine - or Power - to triumph or be triumphed over, to be the dictator or the servant of human ends?)<sup>34</sup>

The economic argument behind Marxism was supported by other contributors as well. G. Lowes Dickinson, in his essay “The Political Background”, directly

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<sup>32</sup> Wright, Iain, p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> F. R. Leavis, ‘Under Which King, Bezonian?’, p. 205.

<sup>34</sup> F. R. Leavis, ‘Restatement for Critics’, *Scrutiny*, 1.4 (1933), 315–23 (p. 320).

attacked capitalism, lauding the economics of the Soviet Union but not her political and cultural methods: 'blazing the path for the world. The economic system she means to establish is the right one; it is the means which she has been compelled to adopt that are wrong.'<sup>35</sup> Attacks on the Soviet system were paralleled with attacks on the flavour of Communist thought which was pre-eminent in Britain as well, which was heavily influenced by the Soviet example. Leavis expressed this as hostility to the oversimplification of anti-bourgeois thought. In his formulation, "the Marxist", 'insists on the one thing, the one necessary preoccupation: to confess to a sense of complexities is to play the bourgeois game.'<sup>36</sup> Moreover, as Perry Anderson has explained, the *Scrutiny* movement could not support a Marxist perspective because they perceived Marxism as a product of the mechanistic society they opposed. As he says, 'it is rejected because it partakes of the very society which it claims to condemn.'<sup>37</sup>

By and large, then, the *Scrutiny* movement, at least initially,<sup>38</sup> accepted the basics of the economic diagnosis made by the Left, as well as the central fact of the epistemological crisis of British culture in the thirties; the sense that something had come out of joint in society. However, the basic assumptions of the group were, in the final analysis, anathemic to the aims of the Marxian left. We should bear in mind that the initial purpose of the journal was its educational agenda, the promotion of the professionalization of literary criticism and the desire to encourage pedagogic practice which would support the restoration of the minority culture paradigm.<sup>39</sup> Denys Thompson explicitly framed the refusal to adhere to a party line in just these terms: 'To those who demand uncritical allegiance to one or another party formula, one can only offer the assurance that the education proposed would enable the young to diagnose contemporary civilization and mobilise some impetus to cure it.'<sup>40</sup> Party politics is thus understood as a symptom of the malaise, not any kind of cure. It was also the case that the Leavisite emphasis on cultural continuity was temperamentally unsuitable for alliance with Marxist goals for the future society; the proletariat were in no sense capable of safeguarding the *Scrutiny* model of cultural

<sup>35</sup> G. Lowes Dickinson, 'The Political Background', *Scrutiny*, 1.1 (1932), 40–46 (p. 46).

<sup>36</sup> F. R. Leavis, 'Restatement for Critics', p. 321.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, p. 54.

<sup>38</sup> Mulhern indicates that most of the Marxist critics stopped contributing to *Scrutiny* in the mid 30s, and Leavis later goes on to define the journal explicitly by its opposition to Marxism.

<sup>39</sup> Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'*, p. 318.

<sup>40</sup> Denys Thompson, 'What Shall We Teach?', *Scrutiny*, 2.4 (1934), 379–86 (p. 386).

heritage, and the entire telos of Marxism was entirely at odds with preserving the best of the past.

A.L. Morton, one of the small number of explicitly Marxist thinkers who wrote for *Scrutiny* in its early days, attempted to move the group towards specific political commitment in his essay "Culture and Leisure", which was a direct response to Leavis, and offered an alternative reading of the theory of leisure in a future socialist state. He argued that Leavis had misunderstood the Marxist analysis of how culture is produced, suggesting that he had failed to grasp the difference between 'methods' of production and the 'mode of production', and that as a result Leavis had misunderstood that culture is produced by 'the totality of productive relations' rather than directly and mechanistically<sup>41</sup>. Furthermore, Morton argued that 'bourgeois culture' was a sum of both valuable and valueless elements, and 'Both are natural products of the capitalist system,'<sup>42</sup> with the aim of *Scrutiny* being to preserve the best of this culture while jettisoning the rest. From Morton's perspective, this was to be mirrored in the development of communism:

just as the economic structure of society will be built, and can only be built, on the basis of the achievements of the earlier periods, so the cultural superstructure will begin with the most valuable elements of bourgeois culture. History proves that anything which is of cultural value, far from being a "tender organic growth" possesses a quite amazing tenacity.<sup>43</sup>

In this, of course, he was in conflict with the Leavisite' fear of 'the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition' being trampled under the behemoth of mass culture. However, even in this rebuttal, Morton fell short of recognising the progressive potentiality of mass culture, by repeating the sentiment that mass culture was a mechanism for alleviating the 'drudgery' of industrialised labour, and 'since men will not have to be relaxed in the intervals of toil, or doped into acquiescence in a system of organized exploitation, there will no longer be any place for the mass production novel or the tabloid press.'<sup>44</sup> The underlying elitist assumptions of *Fiction and the Reading Public* were re-affirmed, and the "mass production novel" conceived as a symptom of a disordered economy, rather

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<sup>41</sup> A. L. Morton, 'Culture and Leisure', *Scrutiny*, 1.4 (1933), 324–26 (p. 324).

<sup>42</sup> Morton, p. 324.

<sup>43</sup> Morton, p. 325.

<sup>44</sup> Morton, p. 326.

than any kind of genuine cultural product.

The *Scrutiny* model of the relationship between culture and society established a Manichean dichotomy, and as D.L. Mahieu has observed 'served to create highly flattering roles for themselves in a self-proclaimed drama between the forces of darkness and light.'<sup>45</sup> As Francis Mulhern described it, *Scrutiny* was 'Anti-fascist, anti-war, anti-capitalist and yet unable to accommodate itself to socialism, even the latitudinarian popular-frontist version of the late-thirties.'<sup>46</sup> *Scrutiny* had no place for commitment to a specific political group because it placed the idea of culture above and beyond politics as a kind of transcendent, metaphysical cause in which the literary elite were to serve above all others, redeeming society by redeeming cultural production. Even while advocating for this model, founded on nostalgia for a fantasy of monosemy, F.R. Leavis tried to position this as an entirely new kind of culture, 'an autonomous culture, a culture independent of any economic, technical or social system as none has been before.'<sup>47</sup> When the future of human culture depends upon such a novel reliance on higher capability, there is no room for an alternative, communal vision of utopia, such as that invoked by collective politics. In this, Iain Wright considers the *Scrutiny* movement as 'both a substitute-religion and, above all, as a *substitute politics*.'<sup>48</sup>

### Left Review<sup>49</sup>

Whereas *Scrutiny* was a primarily literary journal which happened to alight upon political and cultural issues, *Left Review* was a political journal by design and a literary one only incidentally. Initially it was established as the short-lived journal, *Viewpoint*, which ran for only two issues in 1934. In the opening number of this precursor, D.A. Willis penned a scathing attack on contemporary literature, dividing the products of literary culture between decadent, bourgeois modernism and debased commodities:

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<sup>45</sup> D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 298.

<sup>46</sup> Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'*, p. 95.

<sup>47</sup> F. R. Leavis, 'Under Which King, Bezonian?', p. 210.

<sup>48</sup> Wright, Iain, p. 39. (Wright's emphasis)

<sup>49</sup> For accounts of *Left Review*, see Margot Heinemann, 'Left Review, New Writing and the Broad Alliance against Fascism', in *Visions and Blueprints: Avant-Garde Culture and Radical Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. by Edward Timms and Peter Collier (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 113–36; Margolies, 'Left Review and Left Literary Theory'; David Margolies, *Writing the Revolution: Cultural Criticism from Left Review* (London: Pluto Press, 1998); David Margolies, 'Art and Politics in the 1930s: *The European Quarterly* (1934-5), *Left Review* (1934-8) and *Poetry and the People* (1938-40)', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 626–46.

Today writers, as a whole, are bourgeois both in origin and development; their livelihood depends, as much as that of the manufacturer, on production for profit. Thus the literary world is split into two camps; on the one side, the writers of wish-fulfilment dope, who rely for their sales on the worker's desire to escape during his leisure hours from the dreary, mechanical conditions under which he is compelled to exist; on the other, the writers for the so-called intelligentsia, who, wishing to escape from a reality in which they feel they have no part, place their faith either in an exaggerated idea of the necessity for tradition or in a mistaken conception of their own importance, and fly, moaning "Art for art's sake," from a civilization of which they are the final manifestation.<sup>50</sup>

From its inception, then, we can already identify some of the parallels and divergences with *Scrutiny*; the inflation of tradition is scorned, but the condemnation of "wish-fulfilment dope" and its obverse, the artificial elevation of highbrow modernism, are preserved. As we shall see, these trends were crucial to the project of establishing a leftist literary criticism in the thirties, in which the group of writers centred around *Left Review* plays a fundamental role.

Replacing *Viewpoint*, *Left Review* was established by the British Section of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers in 1934, edited by Montagu Slater, Amabel Williams-Ellis and Tom Wintringham, with involvement from Ralph Fox and Edgell Rickword, with Rickword taking on sole editorship in 1937, followed by Randall Swingler.<sup>51</sup> As with *Scrutiny*, *Left Review* immediately laid out the horizon of its project, beginning with the axiom 'There is a crisis of ideas in the capitalist world to-day not less considerable than the crisis in economics.'<sup>52</sup> "Crisis" was the *sine qua non* of both journals, but was not their only point of agreement.

Though all of its editors were communist party members,<sup>53</sup> and it was thus closely associated with the Communist Party of Great Britain and as a result, the Soviet Union, there was no "line" prescribed by *Left Review* when it came to the content of its literary theories, aside from a general acknowledgement of 'the fundamental Marxist notion on cultural production, that

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<sup>50</sup> D. A. Willis, 'New Life for the Novel', *Viewpoint*, 1.1 (1934), 12–14 (p. 13).

<sup>51</sup> 'Introduction: Commitment to the New', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 591–98 (p. 592).

<sup>52</sup> Writers' International (British Section), 'The Statement', *Left Review*, 1.1 (1934), 38.

<sup>53</sup> Margolies, 'Art and Politics in the 1930s: *The European Quarterly* (1934-5), *Left Review* (1934-8) and *Poetry and the People* (1938-40)', p. 634.



social being determines consciousness.<sup>54</sup> The opening issue, for example, included contributions from J.B. Priestley,<sup>55</sup> George Bernard Shaw and Stefan Zweig. With the inclusion of figures such as these, it is clear that the journal did not entirely subscribe to Edward Upward's assertion that 'no book written *at the present time* can be "good" unless it is written from a Marxist or near-Marxist viewpoint.'<sup>56</sup> As we shall see, this absence of an authoritative line on the analysis of culture would lead to discussion and disagreement between writers with different interpretations of Marxist approaches to literature that constituted a significant part of its output,

According to David Margolies, Georgi Dimitrov's speech to the Soviet Writers' Congress was as close as *Left Review* came to a 'literary theoretical line.'<sup>57</sup> Dimitrov's speech stated:

The man who limits himself to repeating "Long live the revolution", is no revolutionary writer! To be a revolutionary writer it is essential to contribute to the radicalization of the working masses, to mobilize them against the enemy.<sup>58</sup>

What this actually meant, in practice, was not straightforward. On the one hand, it led to some writers, such as Alec Brown, enthusiastically putting forth a position derived from adherence to the previously favoured "Proletcult" school, which held that in order to produce revolutionary writing the literary left must subscribe to the 'proletarianisation' of 'outlook' and of 'language.' Indeed, he went further, disowning the entirety of pre-revolutionary culture:

LITERARY ENGLISH FROM CAXTON TO US IS AN ARTIFICIAL JARGON OF THE RULING CLASS; WRITTEN ENGLISH BEGINS WITH US (...) WE ARE REVOLUTIONARY WORKING-CLASS WRITERS; WE HAVE GOT TO MAKE USE OF THE LIVING LANGUAGE OF OUR CLASS,<sup>59</sup>

However, Douglas Garman, responding directly to Brown, cautioned that 'One might as well have told the builders of the Dnieperstroy dam to pay no attention

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<sup>54</sup> Margolies, 'Left Review and Left Literary Theory', p. 73.

<sup>55</sup> The fifth page of the first volume of the journal finds Priestley stating 'The determined literary Left is inclined to be both pretentious and tedious.'

<sup>56</sup> Edward Upward, 'Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature', in *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*, ed. by C. Day Lewis (London: F. Muller Ltd., 1937), pp. 40–55 (p. 41).

<sup>57</sup> Margolies, 'Left Review and Left Literary Theory', p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> Georgi Dimitrov, 'Dimitrov to Writers: A Speech Before the Soviet Writers' Association', *Left Review*, 1.10 (1935), 343–46 (p. 345).

<sup>59</sup> Alec Brown, 'Controversy', *Left Review*, 1.3 (1934), 76–77 (p. 76).

to pre-Soviet science because it is tainted with bourgeois prejudice.<sup>60</sup> This response was fairly typical of the journal, with various critics making the argument that purely tendentious literary products would not fulfil the needs of the cause. In a defence of abstract art, Montagu Slater described such tendencies as “pseudo-marxist” and puritan:

The critics who are alarmed for fear the conventions of Parisian painting of the 1920s should be forgotten are on one side. And on the other side are those severe pseudo-marxists who are so vocal (...) They renounce life like puritans: but if ever there was a man in history who looked on life and saw that it was good, it was Karl Marx,<sup>61</sup>

As Frank Kermode has since indicated, existing Marxist literary theory, derived from Marx and Engels<sup>62</sup> limited comments on literature, had already formulated ‘a principle of interpretative discrepancy - there could be a difference between what a work seemed meant to say and its actual socialist meaning, so that art produced under the old abhorrent dispensations now superseded could nevertheless serve the socialist cause,’<sup>63</sup> and so this became a major theme of literary debate in the pages of the journal.

Disagreements such as these took place in the gaps left over by the inconsistencies and vagueness of Soviet cultural theories, which were crucially explicated at the First Soviet Writers' Congress which took place in 1934 in Moscow, and was to cast a long shadow both within the Soviet Union and on leftist cultural policy in general. The headline literary policy of the congress was the adoption of Socialist Realism, and the congress hosted speeches that laid out the basics of this approach, most significantly by indicating a decisive break with the experimental forms which had emerged and grown following the October Revolution.

A translated volume of transcripts of speeches from the congress was published in English in 1935, and ‘was the only substantive document on Soviet policy that British communists were able to consult during the 1930s.’<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Douglas Garman, ‘Controversy’, *Left Review*, 1.5 (1935), 180.

<sup>61</sup> Montagu Slater, ‘Art and Right and Left’, *Left Review*, 2.2 (1935), 83–87 (p. 87).

<sup>62</sup> As Ellinor Taylor observes, ‘The first publication of Engels’s letter to Margaret Harkness in 1933 – widely quoted by British writers in the years that followed [suggested] that a classically realist approach was preferable to a directly tendentious one.’ (p29)

<sup>63</sup> Kermode, p. 96.

<sup>64</sup> Philip Bounds, *British Communism and the Politics of Literature, 1928-1939* (London: Merlin, 2008), p. 64.

However, before this publication, *Left Review* presented impressions from Amabel Williams-Ellis, who attended the congress. Her report was positive, enthused by the carnival atmosphere afforded to discussion of literary production: 'The atmosphere of general interest, general participation and the sense that the discussions were about live things and not dead, was, perhaps, the most startling impression received by the foreign authors who had been invited.'<sup>65</sup> The report also included her impressions of a speech by Ilya Ehrenburg which was critical of Socialist Realism and was not included when the congress proceedings were later published, and she made no mention of Zhdanov's speech. When the transcripts of the congress were published, this brought a review from Slater,<sup>66</sup> who focussed on 'a single similarity between Soviet and English criticism. The issue he chose was the analysis of form and its consequences for the public role of the writer.'<sup>67</sup> Again, this avoided mention of Zhdanov, despite the prominence of his speech in the collection.

There was not a unified explicit statement at the congress of the definition of Socialist Realism, instead it was presented in outline through the various speeches, which also focussed on contrasting the production of art in the Soviet system with the production of what was referred to as "bourgeois art", by which was generally meant the products of high modernism, in the capitalist countries. In Andrei Zhdanov's speech, "Soviet Literature – The Richest in Ideas. The Most Advanced Literature", he linked the failure of bourgeois literature to the failure of bourgeois society, in contrast with its emergent revolutionary moment:

The decadence and disintegration of bourgeois literature, resulting from the collapse and decay of the capitalist system, represent a characteristic trait, a characteristic peculiarity of the state of bourgeois culture and bourgeois literature at the present time. Gone never to return are the times when bourgeois literature, reflecting the victory of the bourgeois system over feudalism, was able to create great works of the period when capitalism was flourishing.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Amabel Williams-Ellis, 'Soviet Writers' Congress', *Left Review*, 1.2 (1934), 17–28 (p. 18).

<sup>66</sup> Montagu Slater, 'The Turning Point', *Left Review*, 2.1 (1935), 15–23.

<sup>67</sup> Bounds, p. 79.

<sup>68</sup> A. A. Zhdanov, 'Soviet Literature - The Richest in Ideas. The Most Advanced Literature', in *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress*, ed. by H. G. Scott (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), pp. 13–24 (p. 19).

Though the focus at the congress was on the incompatibility of modernist art with Soviet communism, emphasised in another speech given by Karl Radek, who infamously described James Joyce's work as 'A heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope',<sup>69</sup> and went on to explain that modernist literature represented a cynical resignation to the reality of capitalism:

The artists of dying capitalism seek to to hide themselves under a cloak of impartiality. They are sceptics; they are convinced that they believe in nothing, although the very essence of their work is a faith that this decaying world will exist forever<sup>70</sup>

The prescribed corrective to such a change was given as Socialist Realism, a new kind of revolutionary art which 'means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as "objective reality", but to depict reality in its revolutionary development.'<sup>71</sup> Thus, it was proposed that Soviet art should actively present reality as it currently exists, society in its current phase, whilst also presenting its projected teleology, or as Upward would later interpret it, in his "Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature", 'a good book is one that is true not merely to a temporarily existing situation but also to the future conditions which are developing within that situation.'<sup>72</sup> This was again supported in Radek's speech, which stated that 'Socialist realism means not only knowing reality as it is, but knowing whither it is moving towards the victory of the international proletariat'<sup>73</sup>

Zhdanov also saw the crisis of capitalism clearly manifest in the form of the crime story, in which the bourgeois heroes of the traditional realist novel, are replaced by the "heroes" of capital: 'The "illustrious persons" of bourgeois literature - of that literature which has sold its pen to capital - are now thieves, police sleuths, prostitutes, hooligans.'<sup>74</sup> In addition, Zhdanov proposed that in Soviet Realism, a fundamental change be made in the nature of the heroes of

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<sup>69</sup> Karl Radek, 'Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art', in *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress*, ed. by H. G. Scott (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), pp. 72–182 (p. 153).

<sup>70</sup> Radek, p. 158.

<sup>71</sup> Zhdanov, p. 21.

<sup>72</sup> Upward, p. 46.

<sup>73</sup> Radek, p. 157.

<sup>74</sup> Zhdanov, p. 19.

literature, with the “illustrious persons” of bourgeois or capitalist heroes replaced by the “positive hero”, a proletarian ideal man, physically and intellectually capable, working in symbiosis with the progressive movement of history towards the revolutionary promised land. Typical of the literary theories proposed at the conference, these were to be produced in support of a simplistic reflection theory of literature, providing comprehensible examples to the population in which they could find recognition of themselves. In Zhdanov's advocacy for this policy, these were to be, ‘the active builders of a new life - working men and women, men and women collective farmers, Party members, business managers, engineers, members of the Young Communist League, Pioneers.’<sup>75</sup>

Maxim Gorky, in his own speech on the future direction of Soviet Literature, also drew attention to the centrality of crime to bourgeois literature. However in his case, this centrality was described not as a result of the modern decadence of bourgeois literature, but instead as its originator: ‘Bourgeois literature began in ancient times, with the Egyptian “Tale of the Thief”.’<sup>76</sup> . In this light, he identifies the crime tale as ‘what constitutes genuine bourgeois literature, reflecting most vividly its real tastes.’<sup>77</sup> Indeed, extending the analysis to modern times, he finds the crime story not only the favoured literature of the bourgeois class, but also one which is read by the proletariat to the detriment of their class consciousness, seeing themselves reflected atomistically in the judgement of such authors:

Detective fiction is to this day the favourite spiritual food of well-fed persons in Europe. Moreover, in penetrating into the environment of the semi-starved working man, this type of literature has been and is one of the causes retarding the growth of class consciousness; it arouses sympathy for the adroit thief, it engenders the will to steal, to carry on the guerilla warfare of isolated individuals against bourgeois property,<sup>78</sup>

Thus, whilst the incomprehensible decadence of modernism was roundly attacked at the congress, Gorky provided a more subtle attack on genre fiction

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<sup>75</sup> Zhdanov, p. 20.

<sup>76</sup> Maxim Gorky, ‘Soviet Literature’, in *Problems of Soviet Literature : Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Congress*, ed. by H. G. Scott (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), pp. 25–70 (pp. 36–37).

<sup>77</sup> Gorky, p. 37.

<sup>78</sup> Gorky, p. 38.

which implicated its very accessibility as a root cause of its danger. Unlike the works of Joyce, which Radek singled out for opprobrium, the very attraction of the readability of works of bourgeois detective fiction actively work against the revolution. The principle of *narodnost*, of making art deliberately accessible to ordinary people,<sup>79</sup> is thus construed as desirable when used to convey politically correct content, but dangerously capable of being put to the nefarious ends of popular genre fiction.

The congress thus led to a simple recipe for the creation of revolutionary literature. The ideal form would be Socialist Realism, which would be determined by its content, presenting the actual situation of the present day, the dynamic movement of history towards the future and the central position of positive proletarian heroes in that movement. This simple recipe would have a crucial impact on the progress, or lack of progress, in leftist literary criticism in Britain in the 30s.

#### Left Review's Fellow Travellers

The literary criticism which emerged in the pages of *Left Review* and from those connected to it was in large part the prototypical form of leftist literary criticism in Britain. It is a commonly held view that 'Marxist literary theory only really got underway in Britain with the publication in 1937 of three seminal books,<sup>80</sup> these books being Christopher Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality*, Alick West's *Crisis and Criticism* and Ralph Fox's *The Novel and the People*.<sup>81</sup> Emerging from the *milieu* which produced *Left Review*,<sup>82</sup> it is not surprising that these works offered a variety of approaches to leftist literary criticism rather than a unified line, though they certainly shared some significant commonalities. The debate between Brown and Garman mentioned previously was part of what was labelled 'The Controversy', which played out in the pages of the journal, presenting a debate split between those who argued for the immediate and absolute "proletarianisation" of art as a necessary response to this crisis of ideas, and those who wished to preserve the legacies of bourgeois art whilst constructing a new art appropriate to a revolutionary society. This debate

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<sup>79</sup> Bounds, p. 65.

<sup>80</sup> Bounds, p. 7.

<sup>81</sup> In addition to these, 1937 also saw the publication of Philip Henderson's work of literary criticism, *The Novel Today*, and an anthology of socialist criticism, *The Mind in Chains*, edited by Cecil Day Lewis.

<sup>82</sup> West and Fox were contributors to *Left Review*. Caudwell was not, but, according to Pawling, attended lectures given by West and Douglas Garman.

demonstrated the work of dynamically developing a body of literary criticism, despite the isolation of British Marxism from debates occurring elsewhere. Historians such as James Jupp have noted the theoretical isolation of the British left at this time:

British Marxism in the 1930s was a relatively unsophisticated ideology. The *1844 Manuscripts* and the *Grundrisse* were unknown and there was no discussion of alienation or indeed of the philosophical development of the “young Marx”. European Marxists were untranslated and nothing was heard of Gramsci, Lukács or the Frankfurt School.<sup>83</sup>

As such, important works of Marxist literary criticism, such as Lukács’ *The Historical Novel*, though published during this period in their original language, were not part of the early development of Marxist literary criticism. It was a reflection on this context which led Terry Eagleton to describe Christopher Caudwell’s works in the period as pursuing ‘the historically hopeless task of producing from these unpropitious conditions a fully-fledged Marxist aesthetic.’<sup>84</sup> E.P. Thompson describes the situation as the ‘utter poverty and provincialism of the thought available to a British Marxist in the Thirties.’<sup>85</sup> The more self-aware of leftist critics were conscious of their position at the forefront of a fledgling practice, establishing provisional methods and tendencies rather than promulgating legitimate, concrete ones. Eric Cook acknowledged this in *Left Review* when he noted that, ‘Marxist literary criticism is a field in which we are all pioneers.’<sup>86</sup> Montagu Slater even acknowledged that this exploratory practice was being undertaken without access to a complete set of tools:

We are still in the period in England where the last two volumes of *Capital* itself are only available in a poor (and expensive) American edition of what must be one of the world’s worst translations. Engels’s *Origin of the Family* is also only available in an American edition. Marx’s essays, or some of them, are available if you’re lucky, in an inadequate edition bearing the imprint of a publisher who no longer exists.<sup>87</sup>

Thus Marxist literary criticism in the thirties developed without access to key

<sup>83</sup> James Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (London: Cass, 1982), p. 132.

<sup>84</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 21.

<sup>85</sup> E. P. Thompson, ‘Caudwell’, in *Persons & Polemics* (London: Merlin Press, 1994), pp. 76–140 (p. 30).

<sup>86</sup> Eric Cook, ‘Charles Dickens: The Progress of a Radical’, *Left Review*, 3.5 (1937), 303–4 (p. 304).

<sup>87</sup> Montagu Slater, ‘The Purpose of a *Left Review*’, *Left Review*, 1.9 (1935), 359–66 (p. 364).

concepts, combining its inheritance of impressionistic cultural theory with the new impulse to analyse cultural as a material activity, this produced a curiously chimeric body of criticism, which Eagleton has described as consisting of ‘vulgar Marxism, bourgeois empiricism and Romantic idealism.’<sup>88</sup> Each of the three foundational texts of British Marxist literary criticism evaluated popular fiction through the lens of this amalgam.

### Ralph Fox

Ralph Fox, in line with both *Scrutiny* and *Left Review*, perceived the crisis of literature as an aspect of the overall crisis of culture, and so determined to ‘examine the present position of the English novel, to try to understand the crisis of ideas which has destroyed the foundation on which the novel seemed once to rest so securely.’<sup>89</sup> *The Novel and the People*, then, presented the bourgeois novel as a foundation which was no longer secure, and yet still the departure point for the desired creation of the revolutionary novel, which would be formed as the next stage in the development of the novel from its origins in the ancient epic form. In this, he characterised the novel as ‘the most important gift of bourgeois, or capitalist, civilisation to the world’s imaginative culture.’<sup>90</sup> The combination of this form with the school of Socialist Realism as promoted through the 1934 congress, Fox argued, was the key to solving the problems with modern literature: ‘The ‘solution to the problems that vex the English novelist lies precisely in Marxism with its artistic formula of a “socialist realism” which shall unite and re-vitalize the forces of the Left in literature.’<sup>91</sup> This led to a work which Philip Bounds has called ‘the most *prescriptive* work of Marxist criticism in the 1930s.’<sup>92</sup> This is a position supported by Fox’s explicit statement connecting revolutionary writing with the work of the party:

A revolutionary writer is a party writer, his outlook is that of the class which is struggling to create a new social order, all the more reason to demand from him the widest sweep of imagination, the utmost creative power. He fulfils his party mission by his work in creating a new literature, free from the anarchist individualism of the bourgeoisie in its period of decay, and not by substituting

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<sup>88</sup> Eagleton, p. 21.

<sup>89</sup> Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People* (London: Cobbett, 1937), p. 19.

<sup>90</sup> Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 53.

<sup>91</sup> Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 26.

<sup>92</sup> Bounds, p. 134. (Bounds’ emphasis)



the slogans of the party on this or that question of the day for the real picture of the world his outlook demands from him.<sup>93</sup>

The “new literature” is the transformation of the bourgeois novel by Socialist Realism, a form which is presented as a vehicle for conveying a panoramic social vision and entirely suited to the foregrounding of heroic individualism, which had lost its way with the retreat into the self of the modernist, inward-looking novel, but which in the novel of Socialist Realism would be transmuted to the foregrounding of a positive hero, a member of the proletariat, portrayed as an ideal representative of a wider social group. Fox even offered the life of Dimitrov as possible exemplary material for this kind of work, as Dimitrov himself had done in his speech at the congress.

In taking his cues from Soviet theories of culture, Fox re-iterated the analysis of the relationship between form and content presented at the congress: ‘Marxism insists that neither form nor content are separate and passive entities. Form is produced by content, is identical and one with it, and, though the primacy is on the side of content, form reacts on content and never remains passive.’<sup>94</sup> Socialist Realism, then, as the ideal form of revolutionary production, would itself be generated automatically by the application of revolutionary content to the development of society.

When it came to placing popular fiction within his literary theory, Fox’s critical apparatus deemed the entire category unfit for inclusion within the framework in which the bourgeois novel and developing revolutionary novel were housed. Instead the popular novel was subsumed within a general argument for a ‘crisis of quality’ in literary production:

Certainly there were never so many writers producing excellent popular novels, those that tickle our immediate fancy, that we read with pleasure when the wireless is turned off (or even when it is turned on), or in the train, or at the seaside, read them once and never again, unless by sheer accident, having quite forgotten, till half-way through, that we had read them before. These novels, except very incidentally, do not, however, concern us here, for they do not deal with reality.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 109.

<sup>94</sup> Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 40.

<sup>95</sup> Fox, *The Novel and the People*, pp. 20–21.

Popular fiction is presented as pure commodity; consumable and forgettable. In addition, Fox succumbs to the simplification of the Leavisite position on popular consumption, suggesting that economic factors entirely determine the content of popular culture, stating that somehow whilst more books than ever are being read, 'The reader no longer gets what he likes, he has to like what he gets from the publishing colossus.'<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, despite his outright rejection of mass fiction, Fox acknowledged the attraction of the subject of the crime novel, as fulfilling a genuine need in its readers, the demand for excitement which everyday life denied the ordinary man, and which the inward-looking high modernist novel did not provide, as 'it is not merely love of crime or violence which makes the detective novel popular. It corresponds to a real need for action in literature, for the dramatic.'<sup>97</sup>

In addition, Fox recognised the potential of the crime novel to speak to a kind of folk consciousness which the bourgeois high modernist works could not access. In his example, he contrasted American crime authors who present fiction in a language which is living and real with English authors: 'for all their faults, the production of the so-called "hard-boiled" school have created something much more like a living art and a living style than our English writers possess.'<sup>98</sup> In this, Fox acknowledged that the act of creating a proletarian literature was more complex than simply requiring the proletarian cultural vanguard to reproduce the old forms with revolutionary content. In this way, the version of realism utilised in the "hard-boiled" genre articulates clearly the violence and brutality of life in a way traditional bourgeois culture cannot.

### Christopher Caudwell

Like Fox, Christopher Caudwell was killed fighting for Republican Spain in the Spanish Civil War, but unlike Fox, he had no cultural recognition on the left before his death, and all his serious cultural writing was published posthumously.<sup>99</sup> In the intervening years since the thirties, Caudwell's work has received more attention than that of the other leftist critics appraised here. However, this increased attention has led to increased scrutiny, and as such,

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<sup>96</sup> Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 21.

<sup>97</sup> Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 43.

<sup>98</sup> Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 145.

<sup>99</sup> *Illusion and Reality* (1937), *Studies in a Dying Culture* (1938), *Further Studies in a Dying Culture* (1949) and *Romance and Realism* (1970)

Caudwell's work has received some scathing attacks, which support H.A. Mason's assertion in a 1938 review that 'It would be difficult to do justice to the unreadability of this book and to the irrelevance of most of the subject matter.'<sup>100</sup> Though he has indicated that Caudwell is the major Marxist literary theorist of the thirties,<sup>101</sup> Raymond Williams has also argued that Caudwell's literary criticism, as exemplified in *Illusion and Reality*, 'has little to say, of actual literature, that is even interesting,'<sup>102</sup> and 'isn't even specific enough to be wrong.'<sup>103</sup> A more generous summary from Francis Mulhern describes Caudwell's work as 'best seen not as a system to be appropriated as a whole, but as a copious source of insights and arguments needing critical reflection.'<sup>104</sup>

Caudwell's 1937 work, which places him in the first wave of Marxist literary critics alongside Fox and West, was *Illusion and Reality*, and embodied Fredric Jameson's assertion that 'Anglo-American literary criticism has taken lyric poetry to be the paradigm of literature in general.'<sup>105</sup> It was 'almost wholly devoted to poetry; the novel is treated at length only in the brief *Romance and Realism* and never, there or elsewhere, does it receive comparable theoretical definition.'<sup>106</sup> *Romance and Realism*, though written in 1936 was not actually published until 1970, and so was not part of the theoretical discourse which occurred in the thirties. Nevertheless, the basic concepts behind Caudwell's approach to poetry provide some useful insights to genre fiction, and even within *Illusion and Reality*, there were some specific remarks on the position of genre fiction within capitalism which are worthy of our attention.

*Illusion and Reality* initially presents a speculative anthropological account of the evolution of poetry, and by extension, literature. This presents primitive society as communal and primitive poetry as communally generated within the context of collective labour, with this communal production later broken apart by the increasingly specialised division of labour, specifically the division of mental from manual labour. The full realisation of this separation is the fundamental kernel of Caudwell's literary theory; his preoccupation with

<sup>100</sup> H. A. Mason, 'The Illusion of Cogency : Review of *Illusion and Reality* by Christopher Caudwell', *Scrutiny*, 6.4 (1938), 429–33 (p. 429).

<sup>101</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780 - 1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 268., Francis Mulhern also describes *Illusion and Reality* as 'the most important Marxist literary treatise of that or any other period in England', p38

<sup>102</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 268.

<sup>103</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 268.

<sup>104</sup> Francis Mulhern, 'The Marxist Aesthetics of Christopher Caudwell', *New Left Review*, 1.85 (1974), 37–58 (p. 58).

<sup>105</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Ideology, Narrative Analysis, and Popular Culture', *Theory and Society*, 4.4 (1977), 543–559 (p. 546).

<sup>106</sup> Mulhern, 'The Marxist Aesthetics of Christopher Caudwell', p. 39.

artistic and cultural decadence and his interpretation of “the crisis”. This is exemplified in his fixation on the idea of the bourgeois illusion, from which arises the book’s title. This illusion was characterised as the illusion of freedom, created out of the conflict between feudalism, in which the ruling class and its poetry is stagnant, and emergent capitalism, or bourgeois culture, in which its poetry represents its dynamic and revolutionary position. Bourgeois poetry, then, begins as a revolutionary reaction to feudalism. As Marx stated, ‘unheroic as bourgeois society is, it nevertheless took heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war and battles of people to bring it into being.’<sup>107</sup> For Caudwell, the initial revolutionary heroism of bourgeois society is manifest as extreme individualism:

The bourgeois sees himself as an heroic figure fighting a lone fight for freedom - as the individualist battling against all the social relations which fetter the natural man, who is born free and is for some strange reason everywhere in chains. And in fact his individualism does lead to a continual technical advance and therefore to increasing freedom. His fight against feudal social relations permits a great release of the productive forces of society. His individualism expresses the particular way in which the bourgeois economy continually revolutionises the base on which it stands<sup>108</sup>

However, that which is revolutionary in its initial development is later turned to the cause of unfreedom; once bourgeois society is established as a market society, absolute individualist freedom is not compatible with the new society created by the anti-feudal struggle, which only masks a new form of social relations, that of commodity-fetishism, which reduces social relations between men to relationships between men and things, rather than abolishing them entirely: ‘Capitalist economy (...) is the economy of a sham individualism and a hollow freedom for the majority.’<sup>109</sup> Modern literature, then, expresses and maintains only an illusion of freedom with which each individual is able to reconcile themselves to their economic and social environment: ‘all bourgeois poetry is an expression of the bourgeois illusion, according as the contradiction rooted in bourgeois economy emerges in the course of the development of capitalism.’<sup>110</sup> This is manifest in the modernist fixation with experimental form and focus on individual, inward consciousness, privileging subjective experience at the expense of objective reality.

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<sup>107</sup> Karl Marx, ‘*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*’, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 329–255 (p. 330).

<sup>108</sup> Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry*. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1946), p. 59.

<sup>109</sup> Caudwell, p. 58.

<sup>110</sup> Caudwell, p. 69.

Commercial fiction, in Caudwell's schema, is transparent in its commodity form; it is not even masquerading as art, but instead clearly partaking of the commodity-fetish model of social relations. As such, it is largely beneath the judgement of Caudwell's aesthetics. Nevertheless, *Illusion and Reality* demonstrates an extreme contempt for all forms of mass culture, of which commercial fiction is a prominent part:

Because art's role is now that of adapting the multitude to the dead mechanical existence of capitalist production, in which work sucks them of their vital energies without awakening their instincts, where leisure becomes a time to deaden the mind with the easy phantasy of films, simple wish-fulfillment writing, or music that is mere emotional message – because of this the paid craft of the writer becomes as tedious and wearisome as that of a machine minder (...) The modern thriller, love story, cowboy romance, cheap film, jazz music or yellow Sunday paper form the real *proletarian* literature of today (...) It is literature which proletarianises the writer. It is at once an expression of real misery and a protest against that real misery. This art, universal, constant, fabulous, full of the easy gratifications of instincts starved by modern capitalism, peopled by passionate lovers and heroic cowboys and amazing detectives, is the religion of today, as characteristic an expression of proletarian exploitation as Catholicism is of feudal exploitation. It is the opium of the people; it pictures an inverted world because the world of society *is* inverted. It is the real characteristic art of bourgeois civilisation, expressing the real and not the self-appraised content of the bourgeois illusion. "High-brow" bourgeois art grows on the bourgeois class's freedom. "Low-brow" proletarian art grows on the proletariat's unfreedom and helps, by its massage of the starved revolting instincts, to maintain that unfreedom in being. Because it is mere massage, because it helps to maintain man in unfreedom and not to express his spontaneous creation, because of that, it is bad art. Yet it is an art which is far more characteristic, which plays a far more important and all-pervasive role in bourgeois society than, for example, the art of James Joyce."<sup>111</sup>

This critique is repeated throughout *Illusion and Reality*. Later the genre novel is described as a 'characteristic escape from proletarian misery - "escape" literature,'<sup>112</sup> and grouped with religion and jazz as 'ideal wish-fulfilment.'<sup>113</sup> In this, we can clearly identify the parallels with the Leavisite modes of thinking about mass culture. In repeating Q.D. Leavis' reductive comprehension of the relation between economic conditions and cultural production, Caudwell

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<sup>111</sup> Caudwell, pp. 107–8.

<sup>112</sup> Caudwell, p. 245.

<sup>113</sup> Caudwell, p. 294.

presents the desire for mass cultural products as entirely determined by the nature of the working man's existence:

As the proletarianisation of society increases, the conditions of men's work, robbed of spontaneity, more and more make them demand a mass-produced "low-brow" art, whose flatness and shallowness serve to adapt them to their unfreedom. It becomes too much trouble for the average man to read poetry<sup>114</sup>

Yet despite Caudwell's enthusiastic attacks on mass culture, there is also the acknowledgement that this is the "characteristic art of bourgeois culture", and is more culturally influential than the works of high modernism, as exemplified in Joyce. In this there is the hint of recognition that this is potentially revolutionary artistic production, if harnessed correctly. Caudwell even states that this is a protest against misery, but this recognition is repressed by the insistence on the role of mass culture in the maintenance of "unfreedom"; easy gratification does not fit into a schema which is dependent on the valorization of traditional artistic creativity in the creation of elite culture.

#### Alick West

Alick West's *Crisis and Criticism* presented the cultural crisis of its title as a crisis of individualism in artistic production. In West's formulation, the notion of individual creativity had been thrown into disarray by the rise of anti-individualist literary intellectuals, as exemplified by T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards and Herbert Read, and their use of notions of collective cultural production as a replacement, such as Eliot's defence of the homogeneous wholeness of "tradition". For West, these replacements fell well short of the collective ideals of socialism, but were theoretically ripe for conversion to the cause, as they had made the initial leap to the rejection of individualism.

Having made this case, West moves on to frame the debate over literary production within a general theory of aesthetic value in literature. He presents a materialist theory of aesthetic value which places the origins of poetry (and thus literature), in the physical, collective, act of repetitive labour in primitive societies. By extension, the act of subsequent individual literary production

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<sup>114</sup> Caudwell, p. 108.

originates in the organisation of what West called 'social energy', the form in which the social and economic determinants are expressed:

The relation of literature as art, distinguishable from other literary matter, to the social and economic development that determines all literary production, good, bad and indifferent, is through the fact that the economic basis is not an automatic machine, but living men and women, whose energy has to be organised.<sup>115</sup>

Aesthetic value in West's version of Marxist criticism, then, is measured by the relationship of the literary work to the "social and economic development" of society, which are expressed by the writer's individual production. The ideal literary product, in this formulation, is one which expresses the forward movement of society whether its writer is revolutionary or not:

A work may talk revolution; but if it does not show revolution through society's creative movement, it is not fulfilling its' function as literature (...) a work may talk reaction; but if it conveys the sense of the social movement it condemns, the manifestly reactionary work is more valuable than the manifestly revolutionary.<sup>116</sup>

Unlike in the case of Fox, this is consistent with the strong tendency of *Left Review* contributors to insist on the primacy of revolutionary form over tendentious content, 'Because literature, as content and form, expresses and is social change, it hastens it. Literature is therefore propaganda. But not all propaganda is literature.'<sup>117</sup> That being said, West therefore does not need to provide an explicit defence of the Socialist Realist prescription; it becomes implicit that works which adhere to Zhdanov's prescriptions for Socialist Realism automatically evoke the dynamic forces of economic progress and thus also meet West's criteria that 'the criticism of our lives, by the test of whether we are helping forward the most creative movement in our society, is the only effective foundation of the criticism of literature.'<sup>118</sup>

Applying this criterion to literature, West establishes a hierarchy of literary production which moves beyond a simple distinction between

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<sup>115</sup> Alick West, *Crisis and Criticism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1937), p. 99.

<sup>116</sup> West, *Crisis and Criticism*, p. 99.

<sup>117</sup> West, *Crisis and Criticism*, p. 98.

<sup>118</sup> West, *Crisis and Criticism*, p. 102.

revolutionary and reactionary products, and reaffirms the traditional one between good and bad art 'Good literature contributes to that organisation [of human energy] and to the changing of it; bad literature consumes its products and debases them.'<sup>119</sup>

In 1938, in the pages of *Left Review*, West applied his critical method, and his hierarchy of production, to a direct two-part analysis of the detective story. West mirrored Gorky's congress speech in historicizing the crime story, tracing its origin to William Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams*,<sup>120</sup> which explored the radical position that 'the law was better adapted for a weapon of tyranny in the hands of the rich, than for a shield to protect humbler parts of the community against their usurpations,'<sup>121</sup> but explored the revolutionary potential of the genre novel by examining its emergence in the romantic period as 'an expression of a group of ideas and feelings which occupied the leading minds of the period' and sharing 'in the confused revolutionary and reactionary feeling of the romantic moment.'<sup>122</sup> These early examples of the genre allow for the portrayal of a criminal as superior to the forces of law and control. For West, this emergence was as much a formal innovation as a philosophical one, resulting from technical developments which revolutionised "serious" fiction at about this time, primarily changes in the point-of-view in which these narratives were conveyed.

The historicization of the genre contributes an acknowledgement that its political sympathies are not static, and therefore it is not an inherently reactionary form. The early crime novel of the "romantic moment", is then contrasted with the formally refined detective story, characterised by the Sherlock Holmes stories, in which criminal plans were foiled by the superior minds of gentlemen close to the heart of the Establishment. These are a counter-revolutionary form, insistent on the re-establishment of bourgeois normality after the rupture of crime: 'There is nothing revolutionary about it. The origin is rather in the suppressed fear of revolution. The suspense relieves, and the victory of the detective and the law reassures, this fear.'<sup>123</sup> Moving forwards, the twentieth-century form is understood as an accessory of the modern state's apparatus in support of the disciplinary society, with the detective as a part of a

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<sup>119</sup> West, *Crisis and Criticism*, p. 99.

<sup>120</sup> An identification subsequently re-iterated in Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 26.

<sup>121</sup> William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), p. 42.

<sup>122</sup> Alick West, 'The Detective Story', *Left Review*, 3.12 (1938), 707–10 (p. 710).

<sup>123</sup> Alick West, 'The Detective Story, Part 2', *Left Review*, 3.13 (1938), 795–98 (p. 795).



state organisation:

The social function of the detective story now is not so much to relieve and reassure, as in the middle period, as to divert a confused desire for social change into safe channels. It keeps it concerned with crime, and with a police force that has nothing to do but arrest murderers, never makes a baton charge, and always wins, because the very structure of society is its ally and the enemy of the criminal.<sup>124</sup>

Nevertheless, within the description of this repressive modern form also lurked the materialist realization that the genre of crime fiction in this form, in which guilt is often discovered by chance, expresses social totality through the inextricable relationship between crime and environment:

so intricate that no one can commit a crime and isolate it from its environment; at some point or other he makes a contact with social reality, which he forgets or cannot obliterate: he has to travel, buy things, telephone. And for the same reason the criminal cannot stage an act - an alibi, or a murder supposed to be a suicide - without falsifying reality at some point.<sup>125</sup>

This realization goes some way towards grasping the potential of popular fiction to express the fundamental Marxian axiom cited previously; that social being determines consciousness. As such, it goes some way towards expressing the fact that popular culture does not speak straightforwardly, but instead expresses multiple perspectives simultaneously, in this case both the reinforcement of the pervasively repressive state apparatus and the material, economic, causes of crime, and so can contain both emancipatory and repressive tendencies, rather than being a simple expression of social control.

West's perspective on the detective story, then, understood the genre not exclusively as a decadent modern genre, but instead as a central bourgeois narrative. It is presented as a developing category, in dialogue with society; neither a straightforward reflection of a decaying society nor an entirely industrialised commodity form, but instead one which participates in the generation of a bourgeois hegemony which is multivalent and allows for dissenting voices to be incorporated into its chorus of control. However, the

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<sup>124</sup> West, 'The Detective Story, Part 2', p. 797.

<sup>125</sup> West, 'The Detective Story, Part 2', p. 796.

emphasis is still on control and on the neutralizing of radical desire into “safe channels”.

### Mass Fiction: The Anxiety of Contamination

Alick West's essays on the detective story thus represent *Left Review*, and leftist literary criticism in general, attempting to engage with popular fiction in a complex manner, acknowledging the potential polysemy of popular cultural products, even if they are unable to draw anything more than superficial conclusions from this acknowledgement:

Millions read the detective story, not because they are decaying with capitalism, but because they want to live and don't know how. The detective story is also a sign of revolt against decaying capitalism, while endeavouring to make that revolt harmless.<sup>126</sup>

However, this attempt is in an uncommon one in the pages of the journal, which more usually finds itself presenting interpretations which are closer to those of Caudwell and *Scrutiny*, failing to pursue a dialectical approach that would recognise the difference between direct economic, ideological class struggle and its mediated reflection in cultural production.

The groundwork for the generally negative response to mass culture is laid in the framing of “the crisis” which is so prevalent. This crisis, which in bourgeois culture results in the retreat from social engagement which is typical of high modernism, characterised as decadence, is manifest in mass culture as a kind of literary-spiritual degradation. Thus in *Left Review*, J.M. Hay conceives of popular fiction as “pure escape”:

We should avoid conceiving of the “crisis of ideas” too narrowly, as though it were something affecting the petty middle-class only. Although this class absorbs most of the decadent literature of to-day, the workers are not immune from the effects of cultural degeneration and are not unaffected by the crisis of ideas. One of our tasks must be to win back the majority of workers from the purely escape novel of adventure and from the detective novel.<sup>127</sup>

Cecil Day-Lewis echoes this point:

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<sup>126</sup> West, p798

<sup>127</sup> J. M. Hay, 'Controversy', *Left Review*, 1.6 (1935), 221.

To-day, because it is hopelessly at odds with the social order, Art for the great majority must inevitably be merely an escape from the oppression of that order. There is little point - even if there were much possibility - in improving one's mind when one's mind seems to be cut off from action by adverse social conditions: small wonder, then, if many of the working and middle classes remain contented with the cultural dregs which capitalism offers them.<sup>128</sup>

In another essay, Charles Madge uses similar language:

If the novelist has any function in our age, it is to delineate the relationship of an individual to his class, on the basis of scientific materialism. While this function remains in abeyance, the novel will be no more than a plaything or a drug.<sup>129</sup>

Edgell Rickword extends the position, laying the detective novel specifically, and by implication popular fiction in general, alongside other palliative cultural forms, as “antecedents to Fascism”, contributing to the nation being “happily governed” and thus counter-revolutionary in constitution:

There is no need for fierce prohibitions from the Minister of Culture, for lists of “approved subjects” from the Minister of Propaganda, in a country so happily governed. Such is the trend to-day, as is reflected in recent successes, towards quiet studies of ordinary, unsophisticated people, to books about the countryside; and that “other opium” of the bourgeoisie, the detective novel, of course flourishes with every assistance from the high seats of culture.<sup>130</sup>

The common thread through these criticisms is their insistence on the negative quality of “escape”, whether explicitly, or through reference to the drug-like effect of commercial fiction, often in the facile parallel to an oversimplified understanding of Marx’s slogan which frames religion as the “opium of the people,” de-emphasising the prefix to that slogan which additionally positions religion as the “heart of a heartless world”. When Caudwell states that “lowbrow” proletarian literature is ‘at once an expression of real misery and a protest against that real misery’, he expresses the dialectic of the cultural operation of commercial fiction, but then shies away from the potentially

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<sup>128</sup> C. Day Lewis, ‘English Writers and the People’s Front’, *Left Review*, 2.13 (1936), 671–671 (p. 672).

<sup>129</sup> Charles Madge, ‘Struggle in Germany: Review of *Death Without Battle* - Ludwig Renn, *Men Without Mercy* - Doblin, *The Davos Murder* - Ludwig’, *Left Review*, 3.4 (1937), 182–84 (p. 183).

<sup>130</sup> Charles Madge, ‘Straws for the Wary: Antecedents to Fascism’, *Left Review*, 1.1 (1934), 19–25 (p. 21).

revolutionary content of that “protest”. It is a conspicuous blind spot of this leftist literary criticism that this basic identification takes place to varying degrees throughout these texts, but the imaginative leap to its revolutionary implication is not made.

#### Agreements and Alternatives

The *Scrutiny* movement and the *Left Review* milieu both spent the thirties locked into the production of competing and parallel expositions of potential solutions to a crisis which they nevertheless apprehended from somewhat shared analyses and assumptions of its causation. In both cases, it would be fair to say that to some extent, they suffered from an over-reliance on the assumed value of their cultural inheritance. In *Scrutiny*'s case, this cultural inheritance constituted almost the entirety of their regressive utopian project, while in the case of *Left Review*, an inability to conceive of alternative literary judgements to those canonical inscriptions passed down by the liberal tradition constructed a stifling dependence on that tradition at the expense of other forms. Tony Bennett's observation that 'Marxist critics have, for the greater part, merely mirrored bourgeois criticism, accepting its valuations and duplicating its exclusions,'<sup>131</sup> though made in reference to later critics, is justly applicable to the *Left Review* period.

Terry Eagleton has noted that the 'confusion of "vanguard" and "elite" was the precise effect of *Scrutiny*'s inherent contradiction, as an ideological force locked in complicity with the very society it spiritually castigated.'<sup>132</sup> As a movement seeking to put forward an alternative to the perceived ills of modernity and industrialism, they fell short by proposing solutions which inherently promoted their own dominance over cultural production. They also failed to reflect on their own position of privilege, allowing them to seek to impose their solutions on the unwitting masses, confident in the righteousness of their proposals. Contributors to *Scrutiny* were aware of a similar failing on the literary left. Reviewing a work of Marxist criticism, L.C. Knights remarked that 'the first thing to notice is the heavy sprinkling of purely conventional literary judgements,'<sup>133</sup> H.A. Mason makes a similar point in reference to Christopher

<sup>131</sup> Tony Bennett, 'Marxism and Popular Fiction', in *Contemporary Marxist Literary Criticism*, ed. by Francis Mulhern (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 188–210 (p. 192).

<sup>132</sup> Eagleton, p. 14.

<sup>133</sup> L. C. Knights, 'The Economic and Social Background : Review of *Literature and a Changing Civilisation* by Philip Henderson', *Scrutiny*, 4.2 (1935), 203–4 (p. 203).

Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality*, stating 'however revolutionary their interpretation of society, there is a surprising staleness and tameness in their approach to literature.'<sup>134</sup> As we have seen, F.R. Leavis figured the entire Marxist project as a complicit production of capitalism rather than an adequate curative. In both of these movements, revolutionary impulse was restricted by an inability to move beyond existing cultural judgements in any meaningful way.

In sharing an inability to dramatically revalue cultural production, despite their fundamental opposition, the *Scrutiny* movement and *Left Review* generally came together in agreement in their responses to popular mass culture. In some cases, such as Cecil Day Lewis' essay, "Sword and Pen", it would be virtually impossible to confidently assign the essay with any confidence to one group or the other:

Since the beginning of the modern capitalist era, conditions have grown steadily less favourable for the original writer. The bourgeois philistinism against which Arnold inveighed has set up, in place of literary values and taste, a general criterion of commercial value. Worse, it has widened the gulf between the serious writer and the public by making tendentious [sic] distinctions between "highbrow" and "popular" writing.<sup>135</sup>

Calling upon the authority of Matthew Arnold, bemoaning "philistinism", and highlighting an apparently deliberate cultivation of a schism between the brows by commercial culture; all of these are Leavisite complaints, which find themselves at home in a Marxian context. As Coombes has observed, 'The success – or failure? - of Popular Front ideological permeation was, then, such that Marxist cultural practice could be seen as reconcilable with the organicism of Arnold and Leavis, and, by the same token with the continued cultural dominance of the bourgeoisie.'<sup>136</sup>

What such unanimity indicates is a generalised contempt, at the vanguard of the rapidly formalising discipline of literary criticism, for the extant mode of consumption of the masses. *Scrutiny* advocated a return to a mythical "organic community", in which the masses are content with the scraps of elite

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<sup>134</sup> Mason, p. 429.

<sup>135</sup> C. Day Lewis, 'Sword and Pen', *Left Review*, 2.15 (1936), 796–796 (p. 796).

<sup>136</sup> John Coombes, 'British Intellectuals and the Popular Front', in *Class, Culture, and Social Change: A New View of the 1930's*, ed. by Frank Gloversmith (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 70–100 (p. 78).

culture, as selected by the cultural gatekeepers of the literary minority, thus promoting a canon of elite culture. *Left Review* defended the pre-existing canon even while hoping to build a new revolutionary culture composed of works by the working class, or for working class consumption, but with no real interest in what the working class actually wanted to read. Neither group showed much, if any, enthusiasm for the significance of the lived experience of the actual individuals who comprised these groups. In this, it exemplifies Bennett's observation,

there is no *necessary* reason why a space should exist within Marxist theory for the concept of Literature, and the attempt to clear such a space has resulted in the problem of the relationship between the literary or the fictional (and their diverse modes) and the ideological being resolved by definitional *fiat*. Ultimately, the proffered equation of popular fiction with ideology within Marxism is a tautology.<sup>137</sup>

In that tautology, the value apportioned to texts by popular appreciation is irrelevant to these critical projects. That enjoyment of a thriller or romance novel was genuine enjoyment and that such enjoyment had any value was not considered. Or at least, not in the mainstream of either movement.

Representing the vanguard of literary criticism in the thirties, these journals nevertheless do little to upset the dominant, canonical, prejudices of cultural criticism as it stood, and as it was practised. In Charles Rushton's 1939 espionage thriller, *Bloody With Spurring*, the protagonist is himself an author of thrillers who finds himself caught up in international intrigue, and as a result is humorously diminished in conversations with the (inevitably) beautiful women he encounters:

Dorothy's disappointment was as undisguised as her husband's disbelief had been. "Oh, thrillers," she said, in the tone Queen Victoria might have adopted if Tennyson had confessed to writing a thesis on birth control. "I'm afraid I never read thrillers."<sup>138</sup>

Why don't you write poetry instead of thrillers? Poetry might live. Thrillers

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<sup>137</sup> Bennett, p. 204.

<sup>138</sup> Charles Rushton, *Bloody with Spurring*. (London, 1939), p. 87.

Even the products of popular culture themselves are aware of their cultural marginality! The position of *Scrutiny* and *Left Review*, far from establishing a truly alternative critical vanguard, merely rephrases received opinion.

In the paradigm promoted by *Scrutiny*, the collapse of the organic community was predicated on the division of labour, which led to the worker's daily tasks being separated from the fabric of her daily life, and the concomitant generation of leisure as an activity separate from work, as a 'drug habit'. An identical analysis is present in the work of leftist literary critics, even to the extent of the language used to describe these works, with its insistent reference to 'escape' and 'wish-fulfilment.' Some of these critics recognised that literature is a living product of actual people, but were still held back by their need to separate literary production into "good" and "bad". The unification between *Scrutiny* and *Left Review* was the identification of the "bad" with the "mass". They imagined that these texts were not only printed by machines, but also written by machines and consumed by machines.<sup>140</sup> They demanded that literature contribute to the struggle by actively and conspicuously changing the world, for even if literature was not explicitly involved in revolutionary praxis, it provided revolutionary material and aided in the discursive elaboration of antidotes to the cultural crisis. However, these did not accept that leisure itself could contribute to that change; that the need for mental relaxation is a real need. L.C. Knights' comment on leftist criticism could just as easily be applied to the *Scrutiny* movement in this regard: 'The Marxian method applied to people's culture leaves us with only a few formulae; essential life slips through the net.'<sup>141</sup> However, extending analysis beyond the core texts of the movements, it is possible to identify deviations from these orthodoxies in both groups which highlight a previously unidentified strain of thought which allows for an approach to mass culture which is more suggestive of achievable social change.

In *Scrutiny*, Olaf Stapledon, more commonly known for his ground breaking speculative fictions, contributed an essay entitled "Escapism in Literature". In this he offered an analysis of popular fiction which maintained the

<sup>139</sup> Rushton, p. 133.

<sup>140</sup> In some respects, this was almost accurate, if we consider the stories of Edgar Wallace's frankly terrifying levels of productivity.

<sup>141</sup> L. C. Knights, 'Shakespeare and Profit Inflation', *Scrutiny*, 5.1 (1936), 48–60 (p. 60).

realization of a gap between commercial fiction and a separate category of “literature” but did so without discarding the former in an elevation of the latter. His analysis rests on a division of literature into four tendencies, those of “creative literature”, “propaganda literature”, “release literature” and “escape literature”, but without doctrinaire division between the groups, as ‘Any particular work is likely to have aspects or passages characteristic of all four types, but it may also be pre-dominantly of one type rather than another.’<sup>142</sup>

Stapledon is still invested in discussing some form of literary hierarchy, and so admits to a ‘vice called escapism’ but elaborates on the definition of that category to the extent of creating space in which popular fiction is able to operate outside of reductive generalisations. In his explication, all literature is creative, insofar as it provides the opportunity to apprehend fresh aspects of the world, of the self, or of relationships between things. In this context, propaganda literature (separate from “mere propaganda”) represents the transmission of ideas growing in an author’s mind, transforming their experience, while release literature tacitly accepts convention and meets familiar needs, but is necessary and provides release from those needs, allowing for the fact that ‘A great deal of genuine literature is in the main “release literature,”’<sup>143</sup> and,

‘Purgation is a necessary function. Moreover the incidental and minor creative power of “release literature” may benefit a wider public than that which is capable of appreciating literature of a more far-reaching creative type.’<sup>144</sup>

Release is contrasted with “escape”, which is deliberately resistant to creativity and to change, and ‘a debased kind of literature, since it involves a gross limitation of sensibility and an insincere use of creative power.’<sup>145</sup> This analysis of escape is not too far from those we have identified in other *Scrutiny* and *Left Review* analyses, but what sets this apart as a more usefully reflective category is the fact that it is part of an entire spectrum of categories on which popular literature can occupy any position. Even though Stapledon’s analysis maintains a “debased” category, it is not the case that commercial or genre fiction is

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<sup>142</sup> Olaf Stapledon, ‘Escapism in Literature’, *Scrutiny*, 8.3 (1939), 298–308 (p. 301).

<sup>143</sup> Stapledon, p. 304.

<sup>144</sup> Stapledon, p. 304.

<sup>145</sup> Stapledon, p. 305.



automatically placed within that category. Additionally, the “release” category, in which we may expect to find much popular fiction, is granted an extensive defence:

No doubt, to spend a life-time writing “release literature” is to deny oneself the greater experiences; but this is true of any respectable and absorbing work. No doubt the writing of ‘ release literature ’ may be used to distract the mind from duties; but so may any pursuit. No doubt “release literature” may be handed out to the young or to the populace to divert them from discovering that society is heading for disaster. On the other hand, the more unsatisfactory a society, the more urgent is it that there should be effective means for “release,” so that harassed individuals may so far as possible preserve their mental health.<sup>146</sup>

In a society which is ripening for revolutionary change pure “release” is apt to be condemned by the revolutionaries, and regarded as escapism, because it distracts attention from social ills, and thus prevents the gathering of pent-up energy for the revolutionary explosion. But for the individual's mental health “release” is necessary.<sup>147</sup>

Stapledon thus makes allowance in his analysis for the consumers of literature as worthy of consideration. Rather than presenting these consumers as a passive element in the entire process of literary creation, he places the act of consumption – of reading – at the centre of this process, and the readers as individuals rather than undifferentiated categories or “brows”. Furthermore, he also presents the moment of consumption, even of literature which provides release, as a moment charged with the potential to have a genuine impact on a consciousness, specifically emphasising genre fiction as capable of achieving that potential:

there is a kind of writing in which, though the main import is sheer “release”, the manner in which the release is obtained is one which includes a great deal of genuine, though minor and incidental, creation. Thus there are romances, detective stories, thrillers, poems, *belles lettres*, which, though essentially concerned with “release”, are written with such originality of perception and expression that they have a really quickening effect.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Stapledon, p. 305.

<sup>147</sup> Stapledon, p. 306.

<sup>148</sup> Stapledon, p. 303.

In this, “release” fiction satisfies an actual need rather than an illusory need generated by a manipulative economic system, and even offers the potential for a pathway to an achievement beyond meeting that need in the realization of a “quicken effect”. Even though Stapledon does not present his analysis as part of a proposed political or social project, it is clear that in recognising the potential to generate moments of elevated consciousness, he is figuring popular fiction as a cultural category able to incite change.

Meanwhile in *Left Review*, Winifred Holtby’s essay “What we Read and Why We Read it”, provides an inversion of *Fiction and the Reading Public*. In Holtby’s case, she begins with scepticism towards the assertion that taste is deteriorating, even whilst admitting to the vast proliferation of published novels, and being aware that publishers ‘are business men, out to make a profit from the sale of paper on which are printed words which the public will, in some form or other, pay to read.’<sup>149</sup> Thus she is comfortable in literature’s commodity form, and the public’s altered patterns of consumption as a result of the altered material conditions of modernity; libraries, cheap editions, artificial lighting and even commuting are cited as contributing to this change, as are ‘Shorter hours of work, to say nothing of widespread unemployment, [which] have extended leisure. We can read, we have light, leisure and inclination in which to read; we do read.’<sup>150</sup> Indeed, even leisure, that *bête noire*, is treated without condemnation.

Holtby’s essay recognises the divisions we have seen in other critics, proposing three strata of literary production:

‘works of art’, ‘competent works of fiction, sometimes hopefully though not always successfully designed by their authors as candidates for the first class, more often intended simply as superior examples of the third,’ and ‘cheap commercial fiction’<sup>151</sup>

These strata can be straightforwardly mapped onto the “brow” separation discussed previously, but what separates Holtby’s analysis from the other commentaries on mass fiction at this time is her acknowledgement of the complex role that each of these strata fulfil in the lives of the people who

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<sup>149</sup> Winifred Holtby, ‘What We Read and Why We Read It’, *Left Review*, 1.4 (1935), 111–14 (p. 112).

<sup>150</sup> Holtby, p. 112.

<sup>151</sup> Holtby, p. 112.

consume them. She takes the inherent condemnation coded elsewhere into terms such as “wish-fulfilment” and reinterprets that function:

These are the books which cover the counters of provincial stationers and suburban tobacconists and newsagents; they are offered as station bookstalls; they are thumbed in trams and propped against sugar basins in cheap cafes; they are read in crowded living-rooms on Sunday evenings; they are smuggled into offices and cloakrooms. They contain the raw material of human drama, unchanged by the transmutations of art, uncriticized by intellectual reflection (...) They are such stuff as dreams are made on, and their little life is rounded on a sleep of the intelligence. Yet though they have nothing to do with art, they satisfy certain appetites which art also sometimes considers. They meet a social need. They have an ethical and even economic influence. They are not without cultural significance, even if that significance is not specially creditable. Together with the cinema, the popular press and the radio, they must be accepted as the common basis on which the popular imagination feeds.<sup>152</sup>

Like Stapledon, Holtby provides an analysis of literary production which allows for the category of commercial fiction to generate positive change due to its role in feeding the popular imagination. In being integral in the generation of moments of heightened consciousness. To that end, she concludes with a statement which, in its acknowledgement of a potentially revolutionary dialectic between cultural production and life has eluded the other critics we have examined: ‘What we read is closely associated with what we are and how we live. To change literary values involves to a large extent revolutionizing a mode of life.’<sup>153</sup>

Holtby’s position is not a prominent one in *Left Review*’s literary criticism, and it is not developed by other critics. However, Arthur Calder Marshall, in one short review, provides a complementary position which shares a perspective with Holtby. Comparing Robert Cantwell’s novel *The Land of Plenty* with Horace McCoy’s novel *No Pockets in a Shroud*, with both narratives providing a staunchly anti-capitalist perspective, Calder Marshall concludes,

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<sup>152</sup> Holtby, p. 113.

<sup>153</sup> Holtby, p. 113.

From a political point of view, McCoy's book is more important than Cantwell's. It is invading a new department of propaganda. It is not profound, or particularly realistic. But it is going to sell like hot cakes. It is going to reach thousands of people who will never hear of Cantwell. It is going to give them the excitement, the humour and the sex they look for in other thrillers. But at the same time it is going to get across some ideas about society that they have never really come up against. The greater percentage of the reading public will never be touched by "good" literature. Maybe some of them will come to it later. But the only way they will do it is through the channels of their present reading, Boot's, Smith's and the twopenny libraries on the one hand, penny dreadfuls on the other (...)

The tendency which I referred to above, to confuse politics and literature, tends to drive all but highbrow or manque writers from the left. This is the sheerest folly. All writers, whether they are artists or hacks, journalists or detective story writers, are politically essential at the present time.<sup>154</sup>

Once again, this represents an analysis which makes allowances for what readers actually consume, rather than demanding a fundamental behavioural change to consumption of "good" literature. Thus, Calder Marshall dismisses the perspective which considers consumption of popular fiction a form of false consciousness, with the texts themselves existing as and reducible to ideology.

Throughout this analysis, I have deliberately avoided reference to theories and texts emerging from continental Europe which addressed the same concerns and were contemporary with those emerging in Britain. Contributors to *Left Review* were not in dialogue with the Frankfurt School, for instance, even as the same concerns about cultural production were raised in both groups. Even so, in large part, the conclusions reached with regards to popular culture elsewhere were similar. Adorno and Horkheimer's work on the culture industry in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* was no more receptive to the utopian function of mass culture than F.R. Leavis. However, the isolated pockets of appreciation for the potential of mass culture expressed by Holtby and Stapledon was replicated elsewhere, in other isolated pockets of thought, which in their own isolation had little effect on continental discussion of these issues until after the Second World War.

Antonio Gramsci, isolated as a political prisoner in Italy, and therefore not in dialogue with the rest of the European left, and yet to reach the prominence

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<sup>154</sup> Arthur Calder-Marshall, 'Propaganda and Aesthetics', *Left Review*, 3.5 (1935), 300–302 (p. 302).

that would come in the post-war world, made observations parallel with Holtby and Stapledon's interventions. He raised the sort of productive questions on the nature and influence of popular literature which *Scrutiny* and *Left Review* did not deem worthy of attention, outside of the few rare examples we have seen:

why are these books always the most read and the most frequently published? What needs do they satisfy and what aspirations do they fulfil? What emotions and attitudes emerge in this squalid literature, to have such wide appeal?<sup>155</sup>

Gramsci's own solutions to these questions noted the need to study "illusion" and "daydreams", which are themselves produced by social being and determined by history and so are subject to the same patterns of contingency as any cultural product:

It is necessary to analyse which *particular illusion* (with respect to the novel, for example) is given people by serial literature, and how that illusion changes according to historical and political periods.<sup>156</sup>

success of a work of commercial literature indicates (and it is often the only indication available) the "philosophy of the age", that is, the mass of feelings and conceptions of the world predominant amongst the "silent" majority (...) The serial novel takes the place of (and at the same time favors) the fantasizing of the common people; it is a real way of day-dreaming<sup>157</sup>

This perspective recognises that commercial fiction both generates and is generated by feelings and conceptions which are present in the mass of people but unrecognised by elite culture, suggesting the need for a positive hermeneutics of fantasy and day-dream. With this insight, Gramsci suggests the solution to his own questions, with the conclusion that the "new literature", must be popular, and cannot be divorced from the popular culture that already exists:

the premise of the new literature cannot but be historical, political, popular. It must tend to develop what already exists, polemically or otherwise; what is important is that it is rooted in the *humus* of popular culture as is, with its tastes, its tendencies, etc., with its moral and intellectual world, be they backward or

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<sup>155</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from cultural writings*, ed. by David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. by William Q. Boelhower (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2012), p. 342.

<sup>156</sup> Gramsci, p. 376.

<sup>157</sup> Gramsci, p. 348.

conventional.<sup>158</sup>

Similarly, turning to the writings of Ernst Bloch, who, in his utopian version of Marxist philosophy, is opposed to the pessimistic philosophy of the Frankfurt school. Inspired by his appreciation for the Western stories of the German author Karl May, he was a keen advocate for the utopian aspects of commercial and genre fiction which he addressed as *colportage*.<sup>159</sup> In his 1935 work *Heritage of our Times*, Bloch did this in terms which are strikingly similar to Holtby, and which refute the Leavisite image of the passive contentment of the peasantry in the organic community:

Colportage has in its interlacings no muse of contemplation overhead, but wishful fantasies of fulfilment within; and it posits the lustre of this wishful imagination not just for distraction or intoxication, but for *provocation* and for *invasion*. That is precisely why colportage is persecuted by the bourgeoisie as dangerous, namely as filth and trash *per se* (...) it has overrun the *settled* calendars, the droll tales of the *undemanding* populace<sup>160</sup>

Bloch's project speaks to the utopian kernel of mass culture, as he would later clarify:

*A bit of frontier-land is there, at a very reduced price of admission, but with preserved meanings, with curiously utopian meanings, conserved in brutal show, in vulgar enigmaticness. It is a world which has been too little investigated in terms of its specific wishful regions.*<sup>161</sup>

The dream of colportage is: never again the everyday; and at the end stands: happiness, love, victory<sup>162</sup>

In Bloch's analysis, the act of day-dreaming itself is indicative of hope; being able to imagine an alternative reality indicates the possibility of revolutionary

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<sup>158</sup> Gramsci, p. 349.

<sup>159</sup> Zipes defines *colportage* as 'the cheap materials sold by the colporteur or travelling bookseller of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. The *colporteur* carried bibles, chapbooks, cookbooks, primers, medical books, calendars, manuals, prayerbooks, romances, fairy tales, and adventure books.' Jack Zipes, 'Introduction: Toward a Realization of Anticipatory Illumination', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, by Ernst Bloch, ed. by Frank Mecklenburg (MIT Press, 1988), p. xxxviii.

<sup>160</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. by Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge: Polity Books, 2009), p. 161. (Bloch's emphasis)

<sup>161</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), p. 366.

<sup>162</sup> Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p. 367.

change.

Without interaction with influential strands of Marxist thought elsewhere, without the developments and insights of Western Marxism and Humanist Marxism, including the complexities of alienation and ideology, and lacking any kind of theory of leisure beyond the most reductive and most reactionary, it is not surprising that literary criticism in the thirties failed to promote any thoroughgoing theory of popular culture that would have demonstrated a genuine schism with that which had gone before in elitist literary criticism. Commercial fiction, especially in the form of the thriller, held a dominant place in the market, as Chris Hopkins has noted - 'By 1940, something like a quarter of all novels published in Britain were said to be thrillers of one kind or another.'<sup>163</sup> As such, the thriller represented, a site of mass engagement with literary texts, and by extension a site of potential mass engagement with revolutionary politics., However, the literary criticism which arose in the period largely failed to acknowledge or grasp that revolutionary potential due to its adherence to either the inherited standards of stultifying bourgeois tradition on the one hand or, on the other hand, the imported standards of a revolutionary society that had lost its way with Stalinism.

### Conclusion

Ken Worpole has observed that 'In staying so close to highly selective literary traditions, socialist criticism has also failed to understand and acknowledge the many new narrative developments and literary registers that popular genre fiction has in fact produced.'<sup>164</sup> This is especially true in the thirties, not just of socialist criticism, but of aspirationally progressive criticism in general. This chapter has attempted to show that both the *Scrutiny* movement and the *Left Review* group essentially created projects of negative criticism without promoting positive alternatives which would revalue cultural products. Hannah Arendt has noted that 'the often described malaise of the artists and intellectuals is of course partly due to their inability to make themselves heard and seen in the tumultuous uproar of mass society,'<sup>165</sup> and the positions of these two groups can be understood in these terms; desperate attempts to claim

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<sup>163</sup> Chris Hopkins, *English Fiction in the 1930s: Language, Genre, History* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 124.

<sup>164</sup> Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives: Popular Reading - Popular Writing* (London: Verso, 1984), p. 24.

<sup>165</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Society and Culture', in *Mass Culture Revisited*, ed. by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971), pp. 93-101 (p. 97).

relevance in a rapidly changing society, resulting in what Alison Light has described as 'endless attempts to find a canonical literature rather than in allowing a wider or more generous view of literary pleasures and readerships.'<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, as Terry Eagleton has observed, 'The very process of establishing the aesthetic as an autonomous, self-validating category of value is actually a discursive mechanism for reproducing concrete social distinctions and hierarchies as "facts" of human existence.'<sup>167</sup> In line with this analysis, Andreas Huyssen states that 'to reduce all cultural criticism to the problem of quality is a symptom of the anxiety of contamination.'<sup>168</sup> Even while they were penning critiques of mass culture, critics were happy to profit from the contamination, and figures such as Christopher Caudwell and Cecil Day Lewis contributed thrillers of their own, while the form and atmosphere of the thriller infiltrated other culturally progressive fictions, such as Christopher Isherwood's *Mr Norris Changes Trains*<sup>169</sup> and Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome*.<sup>170</sup> In fearing contamination and concomitant undermining of cultural authority, progressive critics simply reinscribed existing judgements to the exclusion of new modes of both writing and consumption.

As we have seen, there were emergent alternatives to these projects, which pointed in the more positive directions this criticism could have taken, but they were rare. Recognition of the anticipatory, utopian contents of mass culture was thus only marginal, and these groups offered instead abstract analyses divorced from concrete historical content which could not catalyse collective mobilisation towards change. This is not to argue for a facile reversion to straightforwardly promote populism over elitism, but instead to recognise that Michael Denning is correct to assert 'all popular cultural creation in capitalist society is divided against itself.'<sup>171</sup> As Bloch noted, the potency of popular cultural forms means they are a potentially dangerous site of theoretical creation:

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<sup>166</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. ix.

<sup>167</sup> Christopher Pawling, 'Revisiting the Thirties in the Twenty-First Century: The Radical Aesthetics of West, Caudwell and Eagleton', in *And in Our Time: Vision, Revision, and British Writing of the 1930s*, ed. by Antony Shuttleworth (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 2003), pp. 45–64 (p. 51).

<sup>168</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. ix.

<sup>169</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Mr. Norris changes Trains* (London: L & V Woolf, 1935).

<sup>170</sup> Rex Warner, *The Aerodrome. A Love Story* (London: John Lane, 1941).

<sup>171</sup> Michael Denning, 'The End of Mass Culture', in *Modernity and Mass Culture*, ed. by James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 253–68.



The grim fantasy of the Nazis has only become possible at all, this *counter-colportage* of theirs has only become possible, because the lastingly revolutionary tensions and contents of the genuine kind (in the most extensive sense) have not been supplied to the proletariat<sup>172</sup>

It is important, then, to recognise this potential and not to neglect it, leaving it as prey to dangerous forces. An analysis of culture which emphasised that cultural production represents conflict, rather than seeking monolithic meaning in texts, would emerge later in the twentieth century in the form of Cultural Studies, though its battles even now are re-staged repeatedly in the face of regressive and outdated school and university syllabi, but as we have seen, its insights could have been available much earlier, if theorists had only known where to look.

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<sup>172</sup> Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, p. 163.

## Chapter <sup>3</sup>:

### 'This imbecile game of snakes and ladders'<sup>1</sup>: Heroism, Generic

#### Competence and Leftism in Eric Ambler's Espionage Thrillers

##### Introduction

Have you heard about Zaleshoff, the mystery-thriller hero of *Cause for Alarm* and *Background to Danger*, adventure novels which swept Eric Ambler, a young Englishman, into the front rank of "whodunit" authors? NEW MASSES has been looking long for something to satisfy the voracious appetites of the detective story devotees. It found it in these two swift books about intrigue in southern Europe - cabals of the arms merchants, Cliveden machinations, Ovra and Gestapo terror.<sup>2</sup>

Printed in 1941 in *The New Masses*, an American Marxist magazine, this strident copy offered two of Eric Ambler's espionage novels as enticements to subscription. For the purposes of this thesis, two particular elements stand out. In the first place, this short advertisement provides a succinct example of the linguistic slipperiness of nomenclature with regards to genre. Within the space of a single paragraph, Ambler's novels are given the labels 'mystery-thriller', 'adventure novel', 'whodunit' and 'detective story'. Evidently, this provides support to the idea that it would be foolhardy to attempt to trace consistency in these labels. More significant, however, is the fact that any reader of these novels will know that promoting them primarily under the rubric of Zaleshoff's heroic status is at best tendentious, and at worst deliberately misleading. This is not to say that his actions in the stories are not heroic; absolutely they are. Rather, it is to say that he is far from the central figure in either novel. These are not novels primarily about Andreas Prokovitch Zaleshoff, the American-born Soviet agent, and his sister Tamara, who appear in both *Cause for Alarm* and *Uncommon Danger*.<sup>3</sup> Instead, in each case this pair of siblings are supporting characters who come to the aid of those novels' actual protagonists. Those protagonists, though nominally the actual heroes of these novels, complicate

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Ambler, *Uncommon Danger* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> 'Cabals and Addicts: Subscription Advertisement', *New Masses*, 14 January 1941, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Background to Danger* was the title used in the USA; I will refer to the novel by its UK title.

notions of heroism by their reluctance to fill heroic roles, or even to admit that such roles are necessary. Ambler's novels, though acknowledged in their time as "a comparatively new type of thriller – the intelligent probable,"<sup>4</sup> are nevertheless still thrillers, and so engage with issues of heroism which are a fundamental concern of the genre, as Barbara Korte has observed;

the thriller has a special affinity with the heroic: In common understanding, heroes are defined by their capacity and willingness to act and/or the extraordinary nature of their deeds. As a genre revolving around agency, the thriller can thus serve as a site where concepts of the heroic can be negotiated and renegotiated.<sup>5</sup>

In this way, the issue of heroism, and of agency, arises throughout Eric Ambler's novels, not simply in terms of its identification with any character in particular, but also in terms of its basic legitimacy as a narrative device. The very notion of heroism itself is one of the many aspects of the traditional thriller up for interrogation by the generic evolution represented in Ambler's works. As Ralph Harper has noted, 'The thriller appeals directly to the reader's dream of decisive, successful action in a situation of significance beyond his own destiny,'<sup>6</sup> thus in the case of the *New Masses*' subscription offer, the desire to identify and highlight a straightforward hero figure who acts in line with the ideological bias of the publication is understandable, and as we shall see, Zaleshoff meets these criteria, while the nuanced, questionably-aligned politics of Ambler's actual protagonists certainly wouldn't make for the same inspiring impact.

Valentine Cunningham has noted that in the thirties, 'politics had been forcefully translated into a question of heroics,'<sup>7</sup> and while leftist thought is notionally predicated on a collectivism which would seemingly preclude preoccupation with individual hero figures, the artistic doctrine of Socialist Realism, adopted in the thirties, called for the promotion of a "positive hero" figure in literature,<sup>8</sup> and the inflated centrality of exalted individuals such as Lenin remained a feature of inter-war leftism. This has been described as a

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Richardson, 'A Master Thriller', *The Observer* (London, 6 August 1939), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Korte, 'Victims and Heroes Get All Mixed Up: Gender and Agency in the Thriller', in *Heroes and Heroism in British Fiction Since 1800: Case Studies*, ed. by Barbara Korte and Stefanie Lethbridge (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 183–98 (p. 184).

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Harper, *The World of the Thriller* (Cleveland, Ohio: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969), p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter Three, above.

characteristic dilemma of thirties Marxism, 'the dilemma caused by the desire to assert the power of the individual, and by the implication of Marxism that the individual is in fact subservient to deeper social and historical movements,'<sup>9</sup> and as with politics, so with fiction. Thus, while it is not a prerequisite for the fictional espionage hero to be an individual physical specimen of the Bulldog Drummond or Tiger Standish type, even Richard Hannay, an early embodiment of an alternative archetype, is possessed of preternatural survival abilities and physical endurance, honed on the South African veldt. These physical attributes are significant inasmuch as they provide the possibility of "decisive, successful action"; they facilitate the fantasy of heroism. Indeed, they are the attributes that make these characters curiously unsuitable for the undercover work they do, such as in the example of Gun Cotton:

Gun was heartily tired of being a secret agent. He was tired of the underground world of stupid whispers and secret happenings. He wanted to cut down forests, blast holes, pour concrete, shape steel, break soil, harvest crops – too much of the secret game made a man so that he was only fit to dust off piano keys<sup>10</sup>

In the thriller as re-imagined by Ambler, we cannot imagine the protagonists growing bored with the secret game; everyday life is confounding enough without the added interest of constant danger. The archetypal heroic characteristics which lead Hannay, Drummond and Gun to seek out adventure cannot be installed in the novels' protagonists, who instead represent the realisation of a fledgling archetype all of their own, namely that of the unwilling amateur. Michael Denning has described this type as 'probably as clearly defined in the popular imagination as Hannay or Bond: the innocent abroad.'<sup>11</sup> In this formulation the Amblerian protagonist is conceived as 'innocent both in the sense of not being guilty, and in the sense of being naive.'<sup>12</sup> A consideration of the extent of this innocence and naivety is crucial to understanding these figures.

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Johnstone, *The Will to Believe: Novelists of the Nineteen-Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> Rupert Grayson, 'Gun Cotton, S.S.', in *My Best Spy Story: A Collection of Stories Chosen by Their Own Authors*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), pp. 78–92 (p. 92).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Denning, *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> Denning, *Cover Stories*, p. 67.

In addition to their misrepresentation of Zaleshoff's predominance in these works, in choosing Ambler's novels for their offer, *New Masses* very clearly situated them as politically acceptable to their communist readership. This is indicative of a position which has endured in later analyses of Ambler's pre-war thrillers; it has been taken as an orthodoxy that the leftist inclination of the novels is self-evident. In an interview, Ambler himself has stated that he intended to write in reaction to Buchan and Sapper, 'to turn that upside down and make the heroes left wing and popular front figures.'<sup>13</sup> Ronald J. Ambrosetti went so far as to describe Ambler as 'the first writer of the thriller to decry capitalism, or any other ostensible ideology.'<sup>14</sup> Leaving aside a fundamental misunderstanding of ideology, this is roughly representative of the consensus. It is not an orthodoxy which needs to be cast aside, but it does bear greater scrutiny than has been offered hitherto; the relationship of Ambler's thrillers to their own political context requires a more nuanced understanding of the position they represent. To this end, this chapter explores what the label "leftist" refers to in the case of these novels, and to what extent its application can be justified. This begins with an analysis of heroism in the novels, first by discussing how the political perspective of the Zaleshoff novels is constructed in the space between Zaleshoff's heroism and the actions of the actual protagonists of those works, and then by discussing how the novels without Zaleshoff approach the presentation of political commitment despite the absence of traditional hero figures. It then goes on to analyse the relationship between the left-wing elements of Ambler's novels and the culture of popular leftism in the 30s, before concluding with a consideration of how we can attempt to parse populist radical fiction in relation to concrete political movements.

### The Parodic Hero in *The Dark Frontier*

Before Zaleshoff's first appearance, Ambler's first novel, *The Dark Frontier*, actively utilised the contrast between the heroic and amateur archetypes in the presentation of its central character. Henry Barstow is a scientist of the definitively unheroic type and uninterested in dramatic action, who at the outset of the novel presciently muses that in the political climate of

<sup>13</sup> Joel Hopkins, 'An Interview With Eric Ambler', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 9.2 (1975), 285–293 (p. 286).

<sup>14</sup> Ronald J. Ambrosetti, *Twayne's English Authors Series, 507: Eric Ambler* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., U.S., 1994), p. 37.

the period 'the only chance for the ordinary man lay in the appearance of some extraordinary man to champion him; some man with superhuman qualities and superhuman abilities.'<sup>15</sup> Soon afterwards he awakes from a car crash believing himself to be just such a man: Conway Carruthers of Dept Y.

Carruthers is an intertextually generic construction, who offers direction as to his lineage even in his name and designation, combining the reluctant sailor turned enthusiastic hero of Erskine Childers' foundational 1903 espionage novel *The Riddle of the Sands* with the improbable espionage heroics of John Creasey's "Department Z" series, which began in 1933 with *The Death Miser*<sup>16</sup> and proved sufficiently popular to eventually run to nearly 30 volumes. As Carruthers, Barstow becomes possessed of the archetypal dramatic characteristics of typical adventure story heroes, and the narrative is not subtle in its presentation of this fact:

Free from the fears and the vanities, the blunderings and the shortcomings of ordinary men, he was of that illustrious company which numbers Sherlock Holmes, Raffles, Arsène Lupin, Bulldog Drummond and Sexton Blake among its members.<sup>17</sup>

This signposting further highlights the intertextual parody employed by *The Dark Frontier*; it is an exaggerated version of the already existing spy thriller, confidently assured of the complicity of its community of readers and separated from the novels it parodies by its deliberate self-consciousness. Unlike *Water on the Brain*,<sup>18</sup> Compton Mackenzie's famous absurdist parody of the form which had been published three years previously, *The Dark Frontier* is a parody which also remains true to both the form and the spirit of the thriller. The story, if it were told with an entirely straight face, would pass muster alongside its peers in the thirties; its conceits are not out of the ordinary. It is not, however, told with an entirely straight face. Throughout the novel there are references to the absurdities of the fictional techniques required to propel such narratives forwards, and to the inertia generated when they are withheld; 'The significant happenings, the coincidental encounters, the fortuitously overheard plans that

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<sup>15</sup> Eric Ambler, *The Dark Frontier* (Glasgow: Fontana-Collins, 1988), p. 88.

<sup>16</sup> John Creasey, *The Death Miser* (London, 1933).

<sup>17</sup> Ambler, *The Dark Frontier*, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> *Water on the Brain*, 1933

had kept Conway Carruthers active before, were unaccountably absent.<sup>19</sup> In addition to this acknowledgement, the narrative is also straightforward in its presentation of the anachronisms of Carruthers' behaviour, describing him as akin to 'the ham lead of a third-rate stock company playing the Englishman in a bum crook melodrama,'<sup>20</sup> and granting similar insights to its other characters:

Carruthers, I had noticed, always liked to regard his incredible guesswork as masterly foresight.<sup>21</sup>

Carruthers has in him a curious streak of pure adolescence. He was like a schoolboy not yet quite grown out of his Red Indian games.<sup>22</sup>

*The Dark Frontier*, then, utilises these generic heroic traditions while subverting them. This is accomplished by drawing the reader's attention to the absurdity inherent in the hyperbole of the formulaic hero, but nevertheless relying on it as crucial to the narrative itself. Without the temporary mania of Barstow/Carruthers, there would be no story; Barstow's inability to act the hero is overcome not by any kind of realist reference to reasonable cause-and-effect, but essentially by textual sleight of hand. In this, the Barstow/Carruthers effect is unique in Ambler's espionage novels. It is a narrative technique that is linked too inextricably to the parodic form of the novel to be the basis for the Amblerian archetype which would emerge in the later novels. The instant, inexplicable, metamorphosis of one character into another is too fantastic to survive as a technique in the more sophisticated works that were to follow.

A more representative figure from *The Dark Frontier* in relation to Ambler's other novels is Casey, the American journalist who functions as narrator for the second half of the novel. As a "newspaper man," Casey is closely aligned with the Amblerian figures who feature in the other novels; figures who are unremarkable individuals but who are technically proficient in their field. Other Amblerian protagonists are journalists, teachers and engineers; neither powerless subalterns, nor possessed of extraordinary characteristics or the power of wealth and status. These are figures closely related to the emerging class of clerks, or more what have more broadly been called

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<sup>19</sup> Ambler, *The Dark Frontier*, p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ambler, *The Dark Frontier*, p. 165.

<sup>21</sup> Ambler, *The Dark Frontier*, p. 204.

<sup>22</sup> Ambler, *The Dark Frontier*, p. 175.

'suburbans,'<sup>23</sup> a group created from the same social changes that had revolutionised cultural production; mass literacy and mass production. These are figures emerging directly from the middlebrow, and also the implied reader to which Ambler's novels are directed; a clear point of analogue with reality which aids the illusion of realism on which these narratives rely.

It is Casey who furnishes the reader with the details of Carruthers' adventures and is the most frequent observer of Carruthers' ubiquitous absurdity. Casey is in a position to provide these details because he accompanies Carruthers on his adventures and is pressed into service to help defeat the conspiracy which motivates the action, at one point being entrusted with a firearm, though he accepts it with a heavy heart: 'I pocketed the automatic with a sigh. The transition from newspaper man to desperado is a more arduous process than some people would have you believe.'<sup>24</sup> In practically direct contradiction to Barstow's miraculous conversion into Carruthers, in Casey's case *The Dark Frontier* acknowledges that being given the rifle does not instantaneously confer the will or the skill to use it. Similar will prove true of the further middlebrow protagonists of the later novels; they are not granted instant transfiguration from one state of mind to another; they progress haltingly and with missteps from one way of perceiving the world to a different state of perception.

*The Dark Frontier* is a tentative movement in the modification of heroism in the thriller which is characteristic of Ambler's experiments with the genre. The residual trope of the fantastical adventure hero operates with no attempt at realism via the instantaneous transformation of Barstow/Carruthers. Meanwhile, Casey operates as a surrogate for the middlebrow reader, sceptical but nevertheless enthralled by Carruthers' absurdity and by the entire enterprise of adventure. In addition, the political landscape of the novel in large part sets out a template which persists throughout the other works, though here it is little more than flavour; arms manufacturers are nefarious, dark political forces are mobilizing in distant Ruritania, and soon, ordinary men will need to make difficult choices.

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<sup>23</sup> John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880 - 1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> Ambler, *The Dark Frontier*, p. 172.



### Zaleshoff, Leftist Hero

In *Uncommon Danger*, the first Zaleshoff novel, the protagonist is an English journalist of Irish-Breton descent, Desmond D'Esterre Kenton. Kenton is living in continental Europe and writing on European affairs. In the opening scenes of the novel, in the limited window in which an espionage novel's protagonist can be presented in relative comfort, without the suffocating external pressure of pursuit and peril, we are introduced to him, as he is gloomily catching a late-night train from Nuremberg to Vienna in order to borrow some money to both pay off recklessly acquired gambling debts and avoid being forced to scurry, penniless, back to England.

In a complication of Denning's formulation of the "innocent abroad," Kenton is a worldly journalist, an experienced foreign correspondent, with a talent for languages, who is introduced to us as he rashly loses his money in a poker game. In this he may be innocent in the sense that he is "not guilty", but from our introduction to him, it does not seem to be the case that he is innocent in the sense that he is naive. Rather, Ambler insists on Kenton's cosmopolitanism. The poker game takes place at Nuremberg and Kenton's recourse to funds is to travel via Linz to Vienna where he is owed money. In this, it is not sufficient that these foreign cities be his usual habitat and frequent travel between them his everyday life, but still further, he is able to recall the train timetables of obscure German rail routes with the ease of a suburban commuter recalling his daily journey; this is a *milieu* in which he is entirely at ease.

The actual espionage narrative of *Uncommon Danger* is not unusual. Kenton is tricked into smuggling military documents across the border between Germany and Austria by Borovansky, a Soviet agent who has been paid to betray his employers, posing as a Jew named Sachs. The party willing to pay for the plans, however, is not another nation state wishing to bolster their intelligence against Russia, but rather a private corporation, Pan-Eurasian Petroleum, running a conspiracy to incite a fascist coup in Romania by exposing Russia's plans as aggression, and thereby secure control of concessions to control the oil supply of that country. That this story is involved in an interrogation of ideological, rather than national, politics is established by the introduction of the conspiracy in a prologue, entitled "In Gracechurch Street",

which firmly locates it at the heart of the British financial Establishment, implicating capitalism from the very outset of the novel.

The prologue introduces the board of Pan-Eurasian Petroleum as they discuss the means to impose their will (and raise their share prices) by manipulation of international politics. The board members are presented as suspect from the outset, led by Mr Joseph Balterghen, who is suggestively repulsive, with his face 'like "a bunch of putty-coloured grapes with some of the crevices filled in,"'<sup>25</sup> and including Lord Welterfield, 'colliery owner and millionaire (...) who employed *agents provocateurs* to provoke a riot in a colliery town during a strike.'<sup>26</sup> With characters such as these on display, the board meeting is presented as a miasma of greed and reactionary fearfulness. When one board member suggests "shooting down" Romanian socialists, 'The meeting laughed heartily and felt a little better.'<sup>27</sup> However, despite the transparent moral turpitude of the board, Balterghen makes a deliberate effort to keep them separate from, and thus uncontaminated by, the street-level gangsters who are used to carry out their plans; he gives explicit instruction to his secretary that "Colonel Robinson" - actually a mercenary thug named Stefan Saridza - is not to be admitted to the meeting, but instead be sent to a vacant office to wait. As well as showing us this straightforward display of artful gangsterism at the heart of the business, the novel then goes on to make clear that in addition to Pan-Eurasian Petroleum, Balterghen is chairman 'of fifteen other companies and a director of thirty more, including one bank.'<sup>28</sup> This is not the isolated practice of a rogue company but a systematic practice.

Even before the intervention of Zaleshoff's Soviet hero figure into the narrative, the leftward alignment of *Uncommon Danger* is emphasised by its undermining of the attempts of Pan-Eurasian to frame their scheming as apolitical. Though Balterghen protests that Pan-Eurasian are simply 'anxious to do business with the Romanian government' and 'not interested in politics,'<sup>29</sup> a point which Saridza later repeats to Kenton, claiming 'the affair is purely commercial. It has no political significance,'<sup>30</sup> *Uncommon Danger* makes clear that in general the interests of capital align most closely with the corporate state

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<sup>25</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 77.

model of fascist government, congruent with E.P. Thompson's clarification that 'Fascism was the logical expression of monopoly capitalism, which had reduced the effective control of the economy to a handful of ultra-powerful corporations or groups.'<sup>31</sup> A key aspect of the operation of ideological interpellation, of course, is to obfuscate the political nature of events; it is in the interest of hegemonic capitalism to present its manoeuvrings as apolitical, to present the rapacious appetite of capital as neutral.

Ambler asserts the generic hero/villain dichotomy and so clarifies the political allegiance of the conspiracy with the inevitable introduction of violence, which 'signifies a radical disruption of normal existence.'<sup>32</sup> Kenton is captured and tortured by gangsters in the service of capital, whose brutal methods are tied implicitly to fascism. One of these is Captain Mailler, who is introduced both as a former Black-and-Tan and 'the only professional strike-breaker in America with an English public school education,'<sup>33</sup> and thus as a darkly mirrored extrapolation of the violence of the Bulldog Drummond archetype and a succinct condemnation of muscular imperialism as well as a visceral example of the novel presenting its antagonists as operating on the side of capital against the worker. The other is Saridza, who reveals himself to be a connoisseur of torture, with specific admiration for the methods of Fascist Italy. Kenton reacts to his treatment with surprising fortitude, a fact which is put down to an innate rejection of the unreasonableness of physical intimidation, 'For the first time in his adult life someone was trying to coerce him into making a decision, and his mind was reacting with cold, angry, obstinate refusal.'<sup>34</sup> In addition, as a sort of meditation on the general political situation, he argues that Saridza and Mailler's tactics are doomed to failure regardless, 'It is a mistake that quite a number of persons of your kidney are making in Europe today,' and that his resistance places him in the struggle 'between the free human spirit and the stupid, fumbling, brutish forces of the primeval swamp.'<sup>35</sup>

Furthermore, outside of the blatant demonstration of the conspiracy's political alliances, Ambler presents Kenton himself as incredulous of the original claims at neutrality anyhow, and instead as perceptive of the extensive

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<sup>31</sup> E. J. (Eric J. ) Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left : Political Writing, 1977-1988* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 109.

<sup>32</sup> Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 68.

<sup>35</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 73.

connections between business and politics. His perspective, grounded in his direct exposure as a journalist, is presented as cynical and agnostic, accusing not only fascism, but all political ideologies, of subjugation to business:

It was difficult, Kenton had found, to spend any length of time in the arena of foreign politics without perceiving that political ideologies had very little to do with the ebb and flow of international relations. It was the power of Business, not the deliberations of statesmen, that shaped the destinies of nations. The Foreign Ministers of the great powers might make the actual declarations of their Governments' policies, but it was the Big Business men, the bankers and their dependents, the arms manufacturers, the oil companies, the big industrialists, who determined what those policies should be.<sup>36</sup>

This presentation of “Big Business” as the true origin of political power is put forward not as a revolutionary perspective, but as reasonable common sense. Later Zaleshoff remarks to Kenton on the typicality of this variety of thought when revealing that their records show him to be representative of a common variety of engaged middlebrow English internationalists, which the position of journalist represents: ‘your dossier credits you with a sort of modest radicalism, very common among English journalists.’<sup>37</sup> A “modest radicalism” in this instance is one which begins from a position of intense scepticism about the entire fabric of geopolitics and about the pervasive influence of capital on politics. In his cosmopolitanism, Kenton is constructed as specifically European, and given this, combined with his keen perception of the determination of politics by business, he is not presented as politically naive. This is a characteristic quality of the Amblerian protagonist, which manifests as a paradoxical expression in which his characters inhabit a self-professed position of resistance to delusions and hysterias through their natural scepticism and their ability to perceive the world “as it really is”, but which itself resists recognition of the harsher facts of the new reality of the period in which they find themselves.

The inadequacy of this pose is highlighted by Kenton’s encounter with another Englishman as, suspected of the murder of Borovansky, he attempts to escape pursuit by both the police and Saridza’s agents, over the border from Austria to Czechoslovakia. Kenton’s journey to the border takes place on a

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<sup>36</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 110.

coach tour which he joins at Linz, and it on this journey that he meets Hodgkin, the other Englishman. Hodgkin is a commercial traveller, presented as simultaneously both insular and international; he is confident and fluent in a continental setting, but grounded in references to the parochial, Priestleyesque England of Bradford and Oldham. Hodgkin's interaction with Kenton repeatedly emphasises his competence at decoding his environment; he easily sees through Kenton's disguise by his English jacket lapel showing under his "Continental" overcoat; he switches effortlessly into German to complain about delays to the conductor of the coach, and receives 'a murmur of agreement from the rest of the coach';<sup>38</sup> he is even fluent enough to note the discrepancy between Kenton's lie of having spent time in a Bavarian sanatorium and his Berlin accent. We soon learn that Hodgkin's ability to read his environment has led inevitably to his unmasking of Kenton's entire ruse. He displays a generic competence developed from life experience combined with watchful suspicion; a potent and appropriate combination for a participant in an espionage narrative. In this, he is helped by Kenton's contrasting incompetence; a visible bloodstain on his sleeve, his furtive behaviour in the travel agent, a series of easily detectable lies about travel arrangements. Indeed, as readers, we perceive the inevitability of Kenton's discovery early in their interaction, with Hodgkin's repeated, ominous, references to the efficiencies of various continental police forces.

In contrast with our experience as readers, Kenton only learns of Hodgkin's superior generic competence when it is deliberately revealed as he helps Kenton to escape. Hodgkin presents his choice to help Kenton as a kind of twisted patriotic responsibility in which England itself is defined in direct contrast with Europe. He frames the choice as revenge for every perceived slight visited on him by his Continental hosts over his years, even as he refuses to shake the hand of a suspected murderer. His patriotism is also double-layered; both inherent and contingent, both reactionary and progressive. In the first instance it is the instinctual rejection of the foreign: 'Fifteen years I've been trailing about this blasted Continent now, and I've hated every moment of it. I hate their grub, I hate their drinks, I hate their way of going on, and I hate them.'<sup>39</sup> The pose resembles the position of the small-minded "little Englander"

<sup>38</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 129.

<sup>39</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 140.

that may be expected of a suburban Englishman abroad, but when elaborated, it is expressed in terms not of ignorance, but of experience; Hodgkin's feelings may be representations of prejudice, but they are supported by exposure. Furthermore, he goes on to explain his exposure not just in terms of the groans and gripes of everyday life, but also in the more explosive rhetoric of an extremely comprehensive catalogue of political violence:

People come over here for a fortnight's holiday and see a lot of pretty *chalets* and *châteaux* and *Schlösser* and say what a fine place it is to live in. They don't know what they're talking about. They only see the top coat. They don't see the real differences. They don't see behind the scenes. They don't see them when their blood's up. I've seen them all right. I was in sunny Italy when the Fascisti went after the Freemasons in twenty-five (...) I was in Vienna in thirty-four when they turned the guns on the municipal flats with the women and children inside them (...) I saw the Paris riots with the *garde mobile* shooting down the crowd like flies and everyone howling "*mort aux vaches*" like lunatics. I saw the Nazis in Frankfurt kick a man to death in his front garden.<sup>40</sup>

Contrasting the romantic idealization of the Continent with its violent reality, Hodgkin is thus both a caricature of the suburban Englishman and a witness to the extreme violence bubbling under the surface of Europe in the thirties. It is an example of what Lee Horsley has described as the tendency in Ambler's novels to present the political violence seemingly endemic in Continental Europe 'as a distinctly un-English political phenomenon (...) rooted in primeval instinct and pathological states of mind.'<sup>41</sup> Bearing in mind that we have already encountered the sadist Captain Mailler, and his English public school education, we are conscious of the inaccuracy of Hodgkin's limitation of barbarism to foreigners and his distinction between Englishmen and foreigners, but nevertheless in broad terms he is speaking a truth about violence that Kenton fails to comprehend.

The presence of Hodgkin has a key influence on our reading of Kenton's role in the text. Until this point, Kenton has proved himself a somewhat reckless figure, but one whose *nous* and cosmopolitanism provide a reasonable foundation for survival of an espionage narrative. His instant, and unknowing, detection by Hodgkin, who is not himself a spy, but instead is a simple example

<sup>40</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 141.

<sup>41</sup> Lee Horsley, *Fictions of Power in English Literature, 1900-1950* (London: Longman, 1995), p. 170.

of 'that strange species of Englishman – the export travellers,'<sup>42</sup> undermines both our faith in Kenton's competence and our casual acceptance of the relevance of his pose of cynical worldliness. Hodgkin's soliloquy on barbarism, though expressed partially as xenophobia, also expresses a reality which Kenton's stance elides. Kenton's modern, internationalist, liberal humanism lags behind Hodgkin's reactionary parochialism in acknowledging the violence of the real. Kenton continues to act as if violent disruptions to his perception of what is normal are temporary and isolated, whilst Hodgkin recognises them as permanent and symptomatic. Perhaps it is the case that Hodgkin's nature would lead to xenophobia regardless of his experiences, but it also the case that in this moment, his prejudices have aligned with reality. Kenton's failure to acknowledge this alignment is a moment of cognitive dissonance both for him and for us.

Aside from his failures to grasp the fundamental changes occurring politically, Kenton also makes the crucial mistake of misunderstanding the rules of the genre in which he finds himself. During his escape, he analyses a map to find a route across the frontier, and whilst correctly inferring that taking the main route out of Austria would invite obvious detection, he also rejects a difficult route over mountains as impractical. Instead he chooses a route through the Bohemian Forest which he soon learns is heavily patrolled and bisected by a substantial border fence, and so is forced to scrape through, in extreme peril, by digging under the fence. Kenton realises, too late, that knowledge of fugitives' biographies has not adequately prepared him for his attempt to emulate them, 'perhaps the rising generation of frontier officials had read those biographies too.'<sup>43</sup> Zaleshoff later informs him of his mistake by explaining a rule of the genre, 'that the stretches of frontier that look easiest on the map are always the best guarded.'<sup>44</sup> Zaleshoff can read not only the map, but also the other minds involved in the process of hunting Kenton, and by extension the espionage narrative itself, in a way that Kenton simply cannot.

In Czechoslovakia, he is quickly picked up by agents working for Zaleshoff, who identify him by the same bloodstain that revealed him to Hodgkin. His capture emphasizes his failure to operate successfully alone, and

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<sup>42</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 132.

<sup>43</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 145.

<sup>44</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 154.

concomitant reliance on Zaleshoff to survive, as Gavin Lambert has noted, 'Without Zaleshoff's capacity for endurance and improvisation, he would never survive. He has nothing to fall back on except his English middle-class belief in muddling through, ludicrously inadequate in a crisis,'<sup>45</sup> and as Peter Wolfe says, this is characteristic of the Amblerian protagonist, who 'is an ineffectual who needs the help of others, not merely to outlast conflict, but simply to survive.'<sup>46</sup> In this, Zaleshoff provides an ideal *deus ex machina* solution to the problem of Kenton's generic incompetence by combining the insight of an experienced genre reader with physical prowess and resilience. Indeed, Zaleshoff effectively skewers Kenton's failure to acknowledge the precarity of his situation by further emphasizing and glossing Hodgkin's argument that he has not yet grasped the extreme violence of the *real*:

the trouble with you is that you were born a member of the ruling races. Your sense of danger is deficient, your conceit is monumental. Or is it, I wonder, that you lack imagination?<sup>47</sup>

Zaleshoff's exact origins are not explicit; he is in some way Russian, whether by birth or ancestry, and was expelled from America for his Communist politics. Regardless of his exact origin, and indeed of our precise understanding of the term "the ruling races," he is an agent of a state in its infancy, and so at the very least lacking Kenton's hinterland of imperialist complacency. It is to this that he attributes his heightened sense of danger, while as we have seen, his generic competence demonstrates his heightened imaginative capacity to comprehend danger and thus to circumvent it.

Martin Green has described adventure narrative, one of the central constituent parts of the espionage genre, as 'a series of events (...) which constitute a challenge to central character. In meeting this challenge, he/she performs a series of exploits which make him/her a hero, eminent in virtues such as courage, fortitude, cunning, strength, leadership and persistence.'<sup>48</sup> The heroic aspects of this description certainly continue to resonate through the espionage novel, and it is these characteristics that, on a basic level, set

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<sup>45</sup> Gavin Lambert, *The Dangerous Edge* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1975), p. 111.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Wolfe, *Alarms and Epitaphs: The Art of Eric Ambler* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), p. 43.

<sup>47</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 156.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 23.



Zaleshoff apart, and differentiate him from Kenton. It is in these aspects that Zaleshoff bears the hallmarks of a romantic hero as proposed by *The New Masses*, but to these we can add more. The romantic hero in the espionage thriller cannot lack imagination because his minute-by-minute ability to survive rests upon anticipating his enemy's movements. Additionally, this imagination rests in a very specific type of knowledge, the literary knowledge of the genre's conventions which dictate the enemy's horizons of possible action. In a spy story, the best way to anticipate his enemy's movements is not to think like a spy, but rather to think like a spy-novelist. On the one occasion on which Kenton demonstrates a superiority to Zaleshoff, it comes not from knowing other minds, or knowing generic practices, but from knowing the timetables of trains and planes between Berlin and Prague; he is capable in a world in which the schedule can be relied upon, Zaleshoff is capable in a world of uncertainty, bluffs and counter-bluffs.

In the other Zaleshoff novel, *Cause for Alarm*, the central character is another Englishman, Nicholas Marlow, an engineer who finds himself unexpectedly out of work and recently engaged to be married, and thus desperate enough to accept a job away from home in Mussolini's Italy. Marlow's new role involves facilitating the sale of shell production machines to Italy, obviously a somewhat compromised position given the relationship between Italy and Great Britain at this time. Marlow's posting leads to his exposure to both international espionage and life under fascism. Arriving in Italy, he is quickly brought under direct observation by the state; his passport is confiscated and "lost", his post is intercepted and steamed open, he is shadowed by the secret police. Meanwhile, he is approached both by General Vagas, a Yugoslavian spying for Nazi Germany, who wants to purchase the specifications of Marlow's machinery, and our old friend Zaleshoff. After some resistance to Zaleshoff's advances, Marlow finds himself in an alliance with Zaleshoff and a fugitive from the Italian police, suspected of the murder of Vagas' wife. Together, they head for the border in order to escape to Yugoslavia, and eventually to feed false information to Vagas in order to contribute to the destabilization of the Berlin-Rome Axis.

On a superficial level, *Cause for Alarm* is less directly interested in denouncing the entire economic structure of society than *Uncommon Danger*. It

is instead a wholehearted criticism of totalitarian rule in general, and Italian Fascism in particular. Whilst *Uncommon Danger* was framed by the involvement of Pan-Eurasian Petroleum in the espionage plot, illustrating a direct causal relationship enacted by a private business encouraging war in order to boost its profits, *Cause for Alarm* is more significantly rooted in the level of national, rather than economic, politics. Ambler submerges Marlow in the day-to-day life of Fascist Italy in order to present a fuller picture of the realities of such a system than is present in his other novels.

Marlow's office provides a neat microcosm of Ambler's presentation of Fascism. His assistant, Bellinetti, is a caricature of libido, vanity and cruelty, and Marlow immediately sees through his bluster. Bellinetti has employed Serafina, an incompetent but beautiful receptionist as an exercise in masculine entitlement, and bullies Umberto, the other member of staff in the office for his deficiency in the fascist "virtues," whilst demeaning his abilities to Marlow. As a demonstration of Marlow's qualities as the sensible, liberal Englishman, he immediately notices the iniquities in the office, and states that Serafina should be removed, whilst promoting Umberto and increasing his salary. The metonymic relationship of the office to the structure of society is emphasised both when Marlow recognises Bellinetti as 'an enthusiastic adherent of *Fascismo*,<sup>49</sup> and when it is revealed that he cannot be removed from his position because he is an OVRA spy. The novel presents the aggrandisement of the bully and the diminution of the meek as central elements of the fascist perspective.

In the novel's finale, as Marlow and Zaleshoff attempt to escape over the mountains to Yugoslavia, Ambler presents a concrete example of the effects of fascism on intellectual life. They find hospitality in the home of Professor Beronelli, who has lost his mind under Fascist oppression. His daughter explains that he was not a political man, but 'when they burnt a book written by one of the other professors he turned against the Fascisti.'<sup>50</sup> His mind is broken by the monstrous irrationality of the new regime and its imposition of irrationality on the university, and he now works on a nonsensical theory of perpetual motion. Thus it is emphasised that even the most reasonable and mild resistance of a non-political man can lead to his destruction by primitive

<sup>49</sup> Eric Ambler, *Cause for Alarm* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 30.

<sup>50</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 256.

irrationalism. Passive resistance is not enough. It is witnessing Beronelli's state that catalyses Zaleshoff into his most impassioned attacks on the contingent delusions of patriotism:

You're British. You believe in England, in muddling through, in business, and in the dole to keep quiet the starving suckers who have no business to mind. If you were American you'd believe in America and making good, in breadlines and in baton charges. Beronelli's crazy. Poor devil. A shocking tragedy. He believes that the laws of thermodynamics are all wrong. Crazy? Sure he is. But we're crazier. *We* believe that the laws of the jungle are all *right!*...<sup>51</sup>

Thus, while *Cause for Alarm* is more interested in national than economic politics, it is also conscientious of the insoluble connections between those forms. Zaleshoff, in the end, argues against nationalisms from a humanist perspective, noting the inherent ridiculousness of believing 'that the patch of earth on which one nation lives is mystically superior to the patch their neighbours live on.'<sup>52</sup> In fact, a professed anti-nationalism is a shared perspective throughout the novel. Parallel to Zaleshoff's critique, Vagas performs his own superiority to nationalism as a position of urbane sophistication, telling Marlow that 'Patriotism is for the *caffè*.'<sup>53</sup> Vagas' statement is grounded in a belief in extreme individualism. In his formulation patriotism suppresses self-interest and restricts business. Zaleshoff's expression against patriotism attacks it from the opposite perspective; it suppresses the true collectivism of class consciousness of "the people" in favour of the illusory collectivism of nation-states. Initially, Marlow's perspective has more in common with Vagas than Zaleshoff. It is the pragmatic approach which causes him to accept the job at The Spartacus Machine Tool Company despite knowing that he is working to provide armaments to Italy which will in all likelihood be used against British troops. In fact, it is a point which is referred to in conversation more than once, and Marlow internally affirms his acquiescence to that, in contrast with a friend back in England, whose opinion he dismisses as a product of extreme politics:

If Spartacus were willing to sell shell-production machinery and someone else

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<sup>51</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 259.

<sup>52</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 258.

<sup>53</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 37.

were willing to buy it, it was not for me to discuss the rights and wrongs of the business. I was merely an employee. It was not my responsibility. Hallett would probably have had something to say about it, but then Hallett was a Socialist. Business was business.<sup>54</sup>

The moral bankruptcy of the epigram to this paragraph is one of the central themes of the novel; adhering to the belief that business is independent of politics, also the claim made by Balterghen in *Uncommon Danger*, leads to a position which is a valueless free-for-all, in which the “laws of the jungle” and the “stupid, fumbling, brutish forces of the primeval swamp” hold sway.

Reprising his heroic role supporting a reluctant protagonist, Zaleshoff does not present himself as a Soviet agent, instead he explains himself to Marlow as ‘a simple American who hates war,’<sup>55</sup> though Vagas reveals the truth about Zaleshoff’s origin to Marlow, who eventually accepts it, despite his preconception that it could not be true, because ‘Soviet agents were sinister figures with beards,’<sup>56</sup> whereas, as Marlow eventually muses, ‘you could not help liking Zaleshoff.’<sup>57</sup> Marlow in this instance is slow to accept the truth because his generic competence has not kept pace with the genre itself, with his perspective matching that in Julian Symons’ observation on early thrillers: ‘no Red, was likely to be an honourable man (...) whose allegiance to some abstract impractical theory left them to behave in an unsporting and ungentlemanly way.’<sup>58</sup> Thus, when Zaleshoff initially appeals to Marlow for his help in providing false intelligence to Nazi Germany, he frames the appeal neither from an explicitly leftist position, nor from one which foregrounds the interests of the Soviet Union exclusively. Rather, he explains how his (and by extension his country’s) perspective is aligned with both the liberal democracies of Western Europe, and in the broadest sense with humanitarian values in general, in the name of the prevention of war: ‘The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are getting ready to go; and, Marlow, if those boys ride out again across Europe, you can say good-bye to all your dreams. It’ll be a war that’ll make the world safe for everything except mankind.’<sup>59</sup> It is only later, after

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<sup>54</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 38.

<sup>55</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 111.

<sup>56</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 267.

<sup>58</sup> Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 17.

<sup>59</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 104.

Marlow is too vulnerable to refuse to join Zaleshoff's cause, that he expounds on the connections between his humanitarian interests and his Soviet perspective of the inherent economic structures precipitating Europe's malaise:

I give you my solemn word that in doing this you are not only helping your own country considerably but also millions of other Europeans. The other day you asked me what the devil this had to do with me. That I cannot explain to you for reasons that you, I fancy, may have a shrewd notion about. You must take my word for it that I am on the side of the angels. And by angel I don't mean British and French statesmen and bankers and industrialists. I mean the people of those countries and my own, the people who can resist the forces that have beaten the people of Italy and Germany to their knees.<sup>60</sup>

Zaleshoff reveals his hand by establishing a distinction which separates "the people" from the abstract entities of nationalism and capitalism which implicitly contribute to their plight. Politicians and capitalists are placed in contrast with "the people", who are victims rather than criminals; he presents the Soviet perspective, which he represents, as a supranational one. In this, aside from his physical capabilities and generic competence, Zaleshoff's romantic heroism is powered by the fact that he is possessed of a specific and unwavering commitment to a cause which empowers his other competences, meeting Korte's description of heroic agency in the thriller as defined by 'the hero's capability and ultimate success in restoring a situation of security and such qualities as courage to face danger and overcome obstacles, willingness to take risks and endure pain and determination to fight for convictions, values and principles.'<sup>61</sup>

### Countering Zaleshoff: Alternatives to Heroism

Phyllis Lassner has argued that Carruthers is the only hero in Ambler's novels:

Ambler challenges the tradition that individual action can confront and destroy the Fascist nemesis. With the exception of the parodied superhero, Conway Carruthers in *The Dark Frontier*, there are no heroes in Ambler's fiction. His protagonists are amateur agents who through errors of judgement or fatal curiosity find their intelligence is a primitive tool when confronted with

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<sup>60</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 155.

<sup>61</sup> Korte, p. 184.

In fact, what makes Carruthers unique is that he is the only figure in these works who is both an explicit hero *and* a protagonist, but even this is not so straightforward, inasmuch as Carruthers doesn't really exist, even in the fiction of the novel, and is only the protagonist of the first half of *The Dark Frontier*. Lassner's position assumes that the hero figure and the protagonist be one and the same, and Carruthers partly meets this criterion. However, in both of the Zaleshoff novels, their protagonists are not hero figures. Instead they are pragmatic realists, self-consciously resistant to hyperbole and determined to reduce their experiences to their rational, reasonable horizon of expectations. Thus when thrust into involvement in espionage narratives, they reflexively resist their entry into the genre. In his meeting with Borovansky/Sachs, Kenton finds 'this talk of spies and danger offensively melodramatic'<sup>63</sup> even as he sinks inexorably into it. Meanwhile, even after living through the events of *Cause for Alarm*, Marlow reacts indignantly to his fiancée's suggestion that he has played a part in a tale of espionage:

"Besides," she added with a far-away look, "if this man Zaleshoff is a spy, he probably doesn't read spy stories."

I was shocked and said so. "I've never heard such an outrageous sophistry in my life before. Besides, who said that it was a spy story? It isn't."<sup>64</sup>

The observation is instructive; with the far-away look of melodramatic imagination, redolent of the indulgence of fantasy involved in the consumption of formula fiction, Claire constructs Zaleshoff as the *sui generis* thriller hero, revealing her ignorance of the reality that it is precisely Zaleshoff's generic competence which has enabled him to aid Marlow's survival. Zaleshoff provides a paradoxically dual corrective to the Amblerian protagonists' deficiencies, representing both the absurd fiction of the 'offensively melodramatic' romantic hero *and* an expression of the reality Kenton and Marlow are resistant to accept. He offers the pleasurable *lisible* fiction of the forceful hero, imposing himself on history, and yet still represents a more clear-eyed understanding of

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<sup>62</sup> Phyllis Lassner, *Espionage and Exile: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Spy Fiction and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 27.

<sup>63</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 17.

<sup>64</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 6.

the true violence of the political context of these novels than the supposedly less fictive, more “realistic”, characters represented by Ambler’s protagonists.

In this respect, Zaleshoff has quite a lot in common with Carruthers, as is clear in comparing the observations from their temporary companions, for whom both produce remarkably similar inspirational effects:

[Carruthers] had a sort of full-blooded theatricality about him that never failed to win my complete confidence. It would not have occurred to me to question his ability to deal with the most desperate situation.<sup>65</sup>

Looking back now on those days with Zaleshoff one thing makes me marvel above all else - my complete and unquestioning belief in Zaleshoff’s superior powers of endurance. It was always Zaleshoff who coaxed me into making a further effort when no effort seemed possible (...) It is only now that I realise that Zaleshoff’s was not physical superiority, but moral.<sup>66</sup>

As well as providing the practical element of protection via genre competence, these characters provide the crucial element of inspiration by their simple ability to act decisively and their physical abilities. While not quite absurdly exaggerated superheroes, these figures do share in occupying the level of the clubland-hero represented by Richard Hannay and Bulldog Drummond. Not supernatural, then, but certainly outside of the range of the normal; exceptional rather than everyday figures. As a fantasy, Zaleshoff is a more subtle form of wish-fulfilment than Carruthers. Both are exaggerations in the vein of typical heroic characters, yet whilst Carruthers comes into being via an obviously contrived and fantastical narrative device, Zaleshoff is presented with at least a semblance of verisimilitude; he is a character who has an implied history and possible futures. His sister, Tamara, wistfully discusses the possibility of finding temporary respite from espionage by their taking a holiday together, suggesting that the Zaleshoff siblings are characters who exist outside of their novelistic construction as spies who simply wink into being for the duration of the novel.

The divergence between these exaggerated hero figures is further emphasised when it comes to their political moralities. Carruthers represents a kind of elemental reaction; he is spontaneously generated out of Professor

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<sup>65</sup> Ambler, *The Dark Frontier*, p. 113.

<sup>66</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 195.

Barstow's inability to respond to a cartoonish manifestation of evil, and in doing so, emerges as a Manichean opposition to that evil. The firm of Cator and Bliss has its role in providing the flavour of corrupt armaments manufacturers to garnish the narrative, and the Ixanian plot provides an ambience of *Mitteleuropa* and international intrigue, but at its centre, *The Dark Frontier* is concerned with a mad scientist and a superweapon; it is not part of some pseudo-realistic, plot. When the conflict is as simple as one between literal good and evil – a superhero versus a supervillain - to take the side of good is not a significant political position. Conversely, the intrigues in which Zaleshoff plays a part are not so morally straightforward. Certainly the moral landscape of Europe's competing ideologies is made clear as the novels progress, but it is provided by the contextual development of the respective narratives; the behaviour, alliances and intentions of multiple characters with diverse motivations. Zaleshoff is a Soviet agent and so a representative of the left and on the side of "good" by affiliation rather than by necessity. Though Carruthers and Zaleshoff share similar moral assumptions, as demonstrated in Zaleshoff's desire to uphold higher standards than "the laws of the jungle", Zaleshoff exists permanently within a position of allegiance to a cause which he would not choose to fight for if he did not believe in its alignment with his morality, while Carruthers exists temporarily to defend the good against the bad; he exists only as a reflex and ceases to exist when that reflex is satisfied.

The notion that Zaleshoff is a more realistic figure than Carruthers is a matter of scale rather than absolute. The realism of espionage fiction is not a naturalist realism, but rather a realism of mood with allowance made for the fantastic embodied in forms such as Zaleshoff, in line with John G. Cawelti's description of formulaic literature which posits that its success relies on 'striking a balance, appropriate to the intended audience, between the sense of reality or mimesis essential to art of any kind and the characteristics of escapist imaginative experience,'<sup>67</sup> or as Denning frames it, in the context of espionage fiction, realism is part of the 'aesthetic ideology of the thriller,'<sup>68</sup> connoting two meanings. Firstly, 'a certain view of reality where violence and brutality are fundamental,' and secondly, 'formal conventions which produce the effect of this

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<sup>67</sup> John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance : Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 34.

<sup>68</sup> Denning, *Cover Stories*, p. 26.



“reality”: the meticulous representation of physical violence, the depiction of brutality and seediness of everyday life.<sup>69</sup> Within the horizon of expectation of the genre, Zaleshoff can be somewhat convincing, but this does not mean that in the abstract he needs to be a believable possible figure. Kenton and Marlow begin with an outlook which is reasonable, “realistic”, founded in common sense, and do not encounter the shortcomings of their perspective in an equally reasonable context, but instead are only corrected by ‘offensively melodramatic’ events, of which Zaleshoff’s heroism is a major element. The inverse logic of this perspective also reflects an ideological reality; their sceptical, ‘modest radicalism’ acknowledges the *realpolitik* which perceives that Big Business dictates foreign policy, but is not prepared for the extension of this acknowledgement to the dramatic break with the norm which is constituted by genuinely radical politics.

In the Zaleshoff novels, the Amblerian protagonist does not begin from a position of genuine understanding of their historical, and thus personal, predicament, but instead moves towards this understanding through both painful experience and through guidance from more clear-sighted figures they encounter. Similarly, the Amblerian protagonist does not begin from a position of commitment to a leftist perspective, but makes tentative movements towards it through exposure to leftist heroes and reactionary villains. For Kenton and Marlow this exposure takes the form of Zaleshoff’s demonstrative heroism, in which he is a direct expression of the leftist perspective in that he is both a Soviet agent and personally a strong exponent of both economic leftism and social justice. However, even as they confront the inadequacy of their faith in the continuation of normality, the presence of Zaleshoff absolves the Amblerian protagonist of the responsibility to act. Any choices they make whilst under his influence are contrived both by his presence and their dependence on him, and the political impotence of the “intelligent European” is not destroyed, it is simply deferred. In the final reckoning of a symbolic gesture, Kenton refuses the cathartic opportunity to execute Saridza, and so rolls back from full commitment; he has survived his ordeal but thereafter does not choose to become an active combatant, attempting to maintain his illusion that this episode has been an interruption of the norm, rather than an intervention of the

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<sup>69</sup> Denning, *Cover Stories*, p. 62.

authentic real into his illusion. This illustrates the tension at play in these novels between commitment to heroic action and avoiding equivalence with the forces of fascism and violence that are precipitating these narratives in the first place. The cultural stereotype of the bumbling amateur Englishman in this period is not accidental. Figures such as Caldicott and Charters, the humorous cricket-loving duo who appear in Hitchcock's 1938 film *The Lady Vanishes*,<sup>70</sup> and thereafter recur throughout film, television, and radio, including the wartime espionage film *Night Train to Munich*, are constructed as the inverse of the imagined ruthless, efficient and humourless fascist hero. As Hall and Plain state, this is a pervasive archetype:

The monumental heroism favoured by Nazi rhetoric – its emphasis on conformity, efficiency and idealisation of a perfect Aryan type – inevitably encouraged the production of a counter-heroism based around non-conformity, muddle, eccentricity and inspiration, and British propaganda responded with the construction of a casual “amateur” heroism,<sup>71</sup>

Ambler's novels are not straight propaganda, but nevertheless they are involved in this production of counter-heroism. As Horsley has observed, 'The fear is that, if he is to engage in action, the hero (or anti-hero) must take on at least some of the qualities of his adversaries, and the process of transformation is in itself traumatic, forcing the unwilling protagonist to traverse the shifting, uncertain terrain between the contradictory worlds of humanity and brutality.'<sup>72</sup> In Geoffrey Household's 1939 novel, *Rogue Male*,<sup>73</sup> this dilemma was made literal, as its protagonist is forced to go feral in order to avoid the pursuit of fascist forces, illustrating Jonathan Ellis' assertion that 'To participate in the fight to save civilisation is to risk civilised values, but non-participation runs the same danger.'<sup>74</sup> Ultimately, the clash between fascism and civilization is unfair because civilization is weakened by the very values it strives to protect. In his short story, "The Army of Shadows", Ambler directly voiced a position on the relationship between civilization and savagery in a portrayal of German anti-Nazi activists, 'We have not always been savages you know. Kurt was a

<sup>70</sup> Based on Ethel Lina White's thriller, *The Wheel Spins*, in which Caldicott and Charters don't actually feature.

<sup>71</sup> Lucy Hall and Gill Plain, 'Unspeakable Heroism: The Second World War and the End of the Hero', in *Heroes and Heroism in British Fiction Since 1800: Case Studies*, ed. by Barbara Korte and Stefanie Lethbridge (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 117–34 (p. 120).

<sup>72</sup> Horsley, *Fictions of Power in English Literature, 1900-1950*, p. 159.

<sup>73</sup> Geoffrey Household, *Rogue Male* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1939).

<sup>74</sup> Steve Ellis, *British Writers and the Approach of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 3.

professor of zoology. Johann was a master printer. I was an architect. Now we are those who crawl across frontiers at night and plot like criminals. We have been treated like savages and so we live like them. We forget sometimes that we are civilized.<sup>75</sup> Kurt and Johann are analogous to Kenton and Marlow, but under living under fascism, they do not have the hinterland of detachment to return to; they are forced to live permanently as savages in order to survive, whereas Kenton and Marlow do so only temporarily.

Though the Zaleshoff novels were not Ambler's only espionage fictions in this period, they were the most obviously operating within the terrain of the traditional espionage thriller, utilising the pursuit narrative, the major consistent formal characteristic of the form, as we have seen.<sup>76</sup> In Ambler's other thirties novels, this kind of dynamic, literal pursuit is replaced by various kinds of claustrophobic entrapment. In this context, rather than embodying virtue and righteousness in a vital, vibrant, heroic individual, these other novels give voice to positions analogous to that represented by Zaleshoff's heroism in less straightforwardly dynamic figures.

*Epitaph for a Spy* operates as a variation of a country house detective story with an espionage narrative. Rather than presenting a physical pursuit of Vadassy, its protagonist, it presents a sealed environment in which, in order to clear his own name of charges of espionage resulting from a pair of mixed up cameras, he is trapped and forced by French police to attempt to uncover a spy staying at his hotel. As in the tradition of the country house mystery, suspicion is plausibly cast on each of its multinational cast of guests in turn, but with his investigations under way, Vadassy's suspicion rests most firmly on Schimler, who is staying at the hotel under a pseudonym and not accounted for by the list provided by the French police. However, after Vadassy confronts Schimler he learns both the reasons behind the false name and the full story of Schimler's ordeal. He is a German communist in hiding from Nazi spies, and living under a pseudonym in order to protect his wife and child who are still in Germany. On learning this revelation, Vadassy undergoes an instant conversion to the defence of his new friend, acquiring a bravery and selflessness heretofore absent in his desperate attempts to save himself.

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<sup>75</sup> Eric Ambler, 'Army of Shadows', in *Queen's Book of the Red Cross*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1939), pp. 113–24 (p. 123).

<sup>76</sup> See "Introduction", above.

As Robert Lance Snyder has observed, *Epitaph for a Spy* is both a pastiche on the absurdity of the country house mystery in the context of modern society and a comment on the unknowability of other minds:

Ambler effectively scuttles the epistemology of mainstream detective fiction. He dismantles this genre in part by exposing Vadassy's fallacious assumptions about the kind of person who fits his preconceived notion of the spy, but Ambler goes further by demonstrating that ratiocination is unequal to the task of penetrating those subtleties of self-invention by which all of us fictionalize our lives and project public identities.<sup>77</sup>

That Vadassy's strongest suspicion falls on the person least deserving of opprobrium is a result of Schimler's strange behaviour, which is itself a result of his adjustment to living a life of fear, but everyone at the hotel, though they are unaware of the intrigue occurring in their midst, nevertheless falsifies their papers, so to speak; no-one is what they seem, even if they are not guilty in the sense which Vadassy is seeking. As an amateur with only partial and outdated genre literacy, Vadassy is hindered by his expectations, and only causes trouble when he attempts to apply his limited knowledge, leading to reproach from the police: 'you were not asked to think or play detectives.'<sup>78</sup> Initially Vadassy asks himself, 'did spies quote Hegel? Did they read Nietzsche?'<sup>79</sup> but it takes exposure to a genuine espionage narrative to realise the question is ridiculous, that the spy 'doesn't look like a spy, you nitwit. He hasn't got a vicious look and a revolver in his hip-pocket.'<sup>80</sup> In this, *Epitaph* dramatises the process of realisation of the totality of ideological conflict; it defamiliarises the reader's expectations by displaying Vadassy's shortcomings.

By presenting Schimler's strange behaviour as a symptom of totalised suspicion, the novel allows the story of Schimler's exile to act as a prototypical model for the conversion of an Amblerian liberal; knowing, superior and complacent; into an Amblerian leftist, a proto-Zaleshoff, with the campaigning zeal of a convert supported by a thorough theoretical grounding. The description of Schimler's conversion is significant in that it presents his Marxist convictions not as the loosely sketched caricature as "Red" or "Bolshevik",

<sup>77</sup> Robert Lance Snyder, *The Art of Indirection in British Espionage Fiction: A Critical Study of Six Novelists* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2011), p. 28.

<sup>78</sup> Eric Ambler, *Epitaph for a Spy* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 55.

<sup>79</sup> Ambler, *Epitaph for a Spy*, p. 70.

<sup>80</sup> Ambler, *Epitaph for a Spy*, p. 76.

which other thrillers would present, or even as Zaleshoff's vague anti-capitalist sentiments but rather as a specific and complex theoretical framework:

It's a funny thing (...) how a man can go on for years living with something he feels to be the truth without even suspecting that he hasn't examined all the relevant facts. That was roughly what had happened to me. It was as though I had been living in a darkened room confident that I knew the colour of the walls and of the carpet. Then someone turned up the lamp and I saw the colours were really quite different and that I had even been wrong about the shape of the room. I had always despised communism, calling Marx and Engels windy theorists and Lenin a gangster with a streak of genius. Dialectical materialism, I used to say, was so much cheap, rubbishy thinking fit only for pimply youths and half-baked intellectuals. I could be very scathing and amusing on the subject. I thought that I was very wise and level-headed. But the odd thing was that I never *read* Marx or Engels. I had the so-called "cultural background of the intelligent European", I was soaked in the neo-Platonism of Bonn. I had not perceived that nothing stinks quite as much as dead philosophies. I was a nineteenth-century man.<sup>81</sup>

Schimler is given a uniquely extensive soliloquy to explain his position and to implicate the middlebrow reader - "the intelligent European" - into the position of ignorance he has successfully transcended. As readers, alongside Vadassy, we are drafted into automatic sympathy not only for him, but for his expressed political position. His oppression and suffering are presented as symptoms of his enlightenment; punishment for breaking out of complacency and reaching a position of opposition to Nazi barbarism. This is the only example of Ambler's presentation of theoretical content in a novel which is given a wholehearted enunciation. As part of their location within the middlebrow, Ambler's novels feature frequent reference to "legitimate" philosophical and artistic works, prevalently the prophets of collapse Friedrich Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler, whose theories have been described as 'a fashionable topic for semi-intellectual conversation [which] fitted the prevailing temper of rather callow scepticism,'<sup>82</sup> but though we may be able to trace the influence of such works on Ambler's novels, they are not given explicit voice within the texts themselves. Instead, they function as a kind of mood music, or flavour, lending authority and a mood

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<sup>81</sup> Ambler, *Epitaph for a Spy*, p. 143.

<sup>82</sup> H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler, a Critical Estimate* (New York: Scribner, 1952), p. 97.

of seriousness. Conversely, Schimler's description of his conversion to Marxism is an extended speech which references multiple Marxist texts in which the content of those works is presented as both significant and explicable. *Epitaph for a Spy*, then, sidelines heroism. Schimler's heroic acts of resistance are narrated to Vadassy, and thereby to us, rather than experienced directly. The meaning of this is clear; it draws attention to the fictive nature of Zaleshoff's demonstrative heroism, implying that in the context of the thirties, heroic acts of resistance are constant, invisible and unrecognised.

*Epitaph for a Spy* was published in 1938, in between the publication of the two Zaleshoff novels. There is no way to know if it was intended for Zaleshoff to appear again, or if the kind of heroism he represented was being dropped from Ambler's method, but following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939, Ambler's use of a Soviet hero figure was rendered unrepeatable, and so Zaleshoff was not to appear again. Furthermore, as Richard Overy has observed, 'Over the three years between 1936 and 1939, the years of the crisis in Spain and central Europe, the balance between saving civilization through peace and saving civilization by war swung decisively in favour of the latter.'<sup>83</sup> With the evaporation of the heroic possibility of alliance with the Soviet Union, and the cultural acceptance of the inevitability of war, the role of heroism, and thus the presentation of political alignment operated very differently in the remaining Ambler novels published.

*The Mask of Dimitrios* is a novel without heroism. Indeed, it is barely an espionage story at all, as Panek has observed:

*Dimitrios* is not overtly a spy novel: the only spy connection resides in the fact that Dimitrios once did some dirty work for the Master Spy, Grodek, and then double-crossed him. Instead, Ambler here examines the sewage purification system which takes a raw, brutal killer and refines him to the extent that he becomes an accepted and protected member of the highest level of legitimate society.<sup>84</sup>

The protagonist is Charles Latimer, a professor of political economy who has retired from academia to concentrate wholeheartedly on the production of his

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<sup>83</sup> Richard J. Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilisation ; 1919 - 1939* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 360.

<sup>84</sup> LeRoy Panek, *The Special Branch : The British Spy Novel, 1890-1980* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p. 144.

apolitical (or perhaps reactionary), cosy crime stories. Following a meeting with Colonel Haki, chief of the Turkish Secret Police, who is an aficionado of Latimer's novels, Latimer attempts to track the story of Dimitrios, a gangster whose corpse is found in the Bosphorus, and shown to him by Haki. The novel dramatises the gap between generic competence and real competence. As a professional author, Latimer is initially amused by Haki's attempt at writing his own detective story, which is composed of the worst and most predictable clichés, but faced with real murder, finds 'From the condescending professional he had been changed, suddenly, into the ridiculous amateur.'<sup>85</sup> He is qualified to ridicule Haki's writing of fiction, but unqualified for the reality of Europe's underworld, later in the novel, he is rebuked by one of Dimitrios' underworld associates, 'Mr Latimer, this is not a detective story. There is no *need* to be so stupid.'<sup>86</sup> As a crime novelist, Latimer should be competent in the genre, but he finds his competence is unsuitable when faced with the reality of crime, as the novel re-stages the negation of the detective story by the modern thriller. Gill Plain has observed the peculiarity of the detective story's fixation on individual corpses in a comparison with the scale of death in war:

In the excesses of death that characterise a world at war, the individual corpse is obliterated: it becomes impossible to mourn for each and every loss. But in detective fiction the reader enters a fantastical world in which the meticulous investigation of a single death is not only possible, but central to the narrative.<sup>87</sup>

In *Dimitrios*, Latimer pursues the pleasant fiction of individual significance, in keeping with his occupation as a detective novelist, but finds the meticulous investigation of a single death is an anachronism in world in which war seeped into everyday life. Latimer's pursuit of Dimitrios' story is not in pursuit of justice or any defensible ideological position. Instead it is selfish and naive, reducing a complex, criminal, destructive life to potential material for fiction. Latimer almost gets his comeuppance in an abortive shootout with Dimitrios, who, as it transpires, wasn't really dead, but survives to return to writing cosy English mystery stories and to repress his newly gained knowledge about how the world

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<sup>85</sup> Eric Ambler, *The Mask of Dimitrios* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 11.

<sup>86</sup> Ambler, *The Mask of Dimitrios*, p. 139.

<sup>87</sup> Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 34.

really works.

In the course of tracing Dimitrios' biography across Europe, he is impressed by Marukakis, a Greek communist journalist he meets in Bulgaria, who in a similar manner to Schimler, though not quite as extensively, is granted the leeway to eulogise on politics, and Latimer recognises 'one or two phrases from the Communist Manifesto.'<sup>88</sup> However, it is not primarily through speech that the novel presents a political perspective, instead, as Panek observed above, it stages the process of capitalism's alliance with gangsterism. Indeed, from Latimer's very first discussions with Haki, it is made clear that although Dimitrios is the individual being pursued, it is the capitalist system that is the real source of crime, as Haki notes 'The important thing to know about an assassination is not who fired the shot, but who paid for the bullet.'<sup>89</sup> Marukakis emphasises the point when he states 'International business may conduct its operations with scraps of paper, but the ink it uses is human *blood*.'<sup>90</sup> Eventually, Latimer grasps this for himself, reflecting,

Dimitrios was not evil. He was logical and consistent; as logical and consistent in the European jungle as the poison gas called Lewisite and shattered bodies of children killed in the bombardment of an open town. The logic of Michelangelo's *David*, Beethoven's quartets and Einstein's physics had been replaced by that of the *Stock Exchange Year Book* and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.<sup>91</sup>

In this, the equivalence between capitalism and fascism we have witnessed in other novels is made even more explicit.

### Situating Amblerian Leftism

Unlike Latimer, who has the freedom and income to travel freely in pursuit of Dimitrios' story, Kenton, Marlow and Vadassy do not begin from a position of elevated separation from reality; these are not Oppenheim or Le Queux's heroes comfortable on inherited incomes. Rather, they begin deeply mired in the everyday real. Respectively they are penniless, unemployed and without a country; their life has some of the trappings of security, but this day-to-day comfort is always contingent. Nevertheless, even these precarious

<sup>88</sup> Ambler, *The Mask of Dimitrios*, p. 66.

<sup>89</sup> Ambler, *The Mask of Dimitrios*, p. 11.

<sup>90</sup> Ambler, *The Mask of Dimitrios*, p. 65.

<sup>91</sup> Ambler, *The Mask of Dimitrios*, p. 187.



positions take on utopian colouring when contrasted with the morass into which these characters are plunged. The real terror of pursuit arises when circumstances deny even the comfort of their unsatisfactory yet familiar lives; the “hunted man” narrative deprives the Amblerian protagonist of his usual comfortable longings and replaces them with what Clive Bloom has called ‘the freedom of *fear* and of being hunted, following from an ontological precondition to experience – that of totalised paranoia.’<sup>92</sup> They are freed from daily worries to focus entirely on survival as their violent entry into a more nakedly dangerous connection to the real is a moment of exile from their psychic hinterland of comfort. As Ralph Harper has said, this moment is a fundamental element of the thriller form, ‘the delight evoked by a successful thriller is a mixed one, the exhilaration of freedom combined with fear and dizziness before the potential loss of self altogether.’<sup>93</sup> In the context of such oppressive fear, desire is reduced to its simplest elements; warmth, shelter, sleep. For Kenton, ‘a hot bath and a comfortable bed,’<sup>94</sup> and more simply, freedom from totalitarian observation, as Marlow experiences following his ordeal in Italy, ‘The luxury of being able to face a ticket collector without flinching was delicious.’<sup>95</sup> As pursuit novels, relying on the psychological and corporeal singularity of protagonists unrelentingly pursued by external threat, Ambler’s thrillers share in representing one of the apotheoses of the novel form as an expression of bourgeois individuality, ‘a literary form which traditionally studied the problematic insertion of the individual in history.’<sup>96</sup> The individual inserted into the history of the thirties is at the mercy of hostile forces far greater than themselves and so craves escape from those forces to more stable moments which confirm their individuation.

Ambler’s protagonists cannot approach leftist perspectives directly because they are interpellated as ideological subjects inextricably attached to their partial lives within capitalist civilization and the protections and comforts of their liberal humanist social democratic society. Through the process of pursuit and exposure to the fractures at the margins of that civilization, margins which

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<sup>92</sup> ‘Introduction: The Spy Thriller: A Genre Under Cover?’, in *Spy Thrillers: From Buchan to Le Carre*, ed. by Clive Bloom (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 1–11 (p. 4).

<sup>93</sup> Harper, p. 115.

<sup>94</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 166.

<sup>95</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 260.

<sup>96</sup> Ian H. Birchall, ‘The Novel and the Party’, in 1936 : *The Sociology of Literature. Vol.2 Practices of Literature and Politics*, ed. by Francis Barker (Colchester: University of Essex, 1979), pp. 163–78 (p. 166).

are rapidly colonizing the centre, they take on aspects of the beliefs expressed by their temporary allies whilst retaining the essential core yearning to re-attain the relative stability of bourgeois normality. Whereas Bulldog Drummond and Richard Hannay enter into thriller narratives as potential curatives to boredom, the Amblerian protagonist is usually drawn into them unwillingly, provoked or entrapped. They are not, initially, motivated by ideology, and thus, surrogates are made to occupy the position of voicing, or enacting these ideological perspectives while the Amblerian protagonist finds themselves along for the ride. The “realistic”, “reasonable” cynicism with which Ambler’s protagonists initially perceive the world reveals their absolute subjugation to the ideological processes of capitalist realism. Slavoj Žižek has noted the way in which cynicism allows us to continue to act contrary to our beliefs by overvaluing our subjective attitude over our actions: ‘Cynical distance is just one way (...) to blind ourselves to the structural power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*,’<sup>97</sup> Kenton, Marlow and Latimer perceive ways in which society falls short, and yet do not act until they have no choice. Then following their adventures, they attempt to limit exposure to the violence reality by classifying it as a temporary episode; Latimer returns to writing cosy mysteries, Marlow returns to England and accepts an offer to work for Cator and Bliss. In presenting his protagonists as so recurrently resistant to reality, Ambler problematises the possibility of leftist commitment representing genuine change.

As Raymond Williams has observed, “Thirties Marxism” was a temporary, local and specific form of Marxism,<sup>98</sup> and the leftist perspective as portrayed by Zaleshoff’s heroic characterisation and voiced by Ambler’s other novels arises from within this thirties context. As we have seen, in this period, there was no single perspective which encompassed “the Left” as a whole,<sup>99</sup> and much as linguistic inconsistency was rampant in the analysis and discussion of crime fiction, a lack of consistency was endemic in the labelling of leftist thought in popular culture. Whilst committed thinkers and activists may have been clear as to their own terminology and distinctions, the same could not be said of how these issues were understood outside of those circles. As

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<sup>97</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 33.

<sup>98</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780 - 1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 262.

<sup>99</sup> See above, Chapter 2

Samuel Hynes has suggested, 'almost no-one outside of the Party had a very clear idea of what Communism was.'<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, it is broadly acknowledged that leftist cultural affiliation predominated in an unprecedented manner in the decade. Some of the most renowned examples of this acknowledgement, such as Virginia Woolf's essay "The Leaning Tower" and Orwell's essay "Inside the Whale" have propagated this acknowledgement alongside open criticism of its shallow nature, while academic criticism has repeated the acknowledgement with a more measured tone in studies such as Hynes' *The Auden Generation*. In large part, the appreciation of the thirties as the "red decade" has gone in tandem with a focus on the Auden group, as the title of Hynes' study implies, though as LeMahieu has observed, 'Although some analysts might prefer to associate the Thirties with W.H. Auden, most British citizens never heard of this gifted figure or read his poems,'<sup>101</sup> and as A.J.P. Taylor asserted, 'Maybe Auden expressed in poetic form what many Englishmen were thinking. This does not mean that they read his poems or had even heard of him.'<sup>102</sup>

The dominant leftist presence on a global scale was the Soviet Union, and for anyone outside of that country who operated in affiliation with official communist groups, Soviet policy provided a doctrinaire perspective to follow under the aegis of the Communist Third International, also known as the Comintern. Prior to 1935<sup>103</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the Comintern in Moscow, official Comintern policy called for a "class against class" policy, which actively forbade co-operation with non-Communist organisations, but in response to the changing global political situation, and specifically the rise of Fascism, the congress saw a change in this policy. In its place, the Comintern adopted a strategy of collective security against fascism, welcoming alliances with non-Communist elements. Thus a broad anti-fascist coalition was legitimised and variously nuanced shades of leftism endorsed into the "official" left, described by Raymond Williams as 'a set of concentric circles of unity'<sup>104</sup> thus attempting to reverse the fragmentation and marginalisation which left the

<sup>100</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 113.

<sup>101</sup> D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 333.

<sup>102</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 311.

<sup>103</sup> '1935: The Turning Point', in Jim Fyrth, ed., *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), pp. 31-33.

<sup>104</sup> E. J. (Eric J. ) Hobsbawm, p. 108.

Communist Party of Great Britain isolated as it never had a significant membership of its own.

The pronounced leftwards shift during the thirties was thus encapsulated by the rise of the Popular Front, as an alliance which accommodated the heteroglossia of the competing positions which formed the left. The prominent figures of intellectual commitment of the period, whether they were Communist Party members or not, each had their own position in alignment with the prevailing tendencies of leftist thought, somewhere within the constellation of Marxism, Communism, Fabianism, Stalinism, socialism, social democracy and liberalism. The Popular Front was an attempt to corral these diverse positions under a single cause, and was a significant force, despite its failure to fully heal the rifts of the British left, as it was officially rejected by crucial organisations such as the Labour Party and the Independent Labour Party, and by figures such as George Orwell, who described it as ‘the nauseous spectacle of bishops, Communists, cocoa-magnates, publishers, duchesses and Labour MPs marching arm in arm to the tune of “Rule Britannia.”’<sup>105</sup> The sense of compromise that Orwell rejected was highlighted in examples of advocacy for the Popular Front strategy, such as that demonstrated by Rex Warner in the collection *The Mind in Chains*, in which we can see the appeal to the broad church generating a less strident theoretical position in the name of co-operation:

nowadays, as has often been pointed out, one need not be a Marxist, one need only be an ordinary decent person, to approve of the immediate practical aims of Marxism (...) If some people don't like the word “Marxism”, we must be prepared to say “common sense”.<sup>106</sup>

Accordingly, the legacy of this alliance is not without controversy. John Coombes has indicated that such a defensive reconfiguration of the left was in some respects, to its detriment: ‘a loss of intellectual direction and cohesion which amounted in many instances to full-scale capitulation to the values and

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<sup>105</sup> George Orwell, ‘Review, *Workers Front* by Fenner Brockway’, in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 1: An Age like This: 1920 - 1940*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 339–40 (p. 339).

<sup>106</sup> Warner, Rex, ‘Education’, in *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution*, ed. by C. Day Lewis (London: F. Muller Ltd., 1937), pp. 21–37 (p. 36).

norms of bourgeois liberalism.<sup>107</sup> Or as E.P. Thompson described it, 'Popular Front, Left Book Club and the rest are seen, not as a political response within a definite political context, but as the projection of the neuroses and petty motives of a section of the English middle class.'<sup>108</sup> Accordingly, Ronald Blythe indicated that British leftism of this time was fundamentally separate from its international equivalent, Russians and Communists generally had not then caught on to the fact that there is socialism and there is *British* socialism, by which one might as well say that there is blood and there is red ink, for all that they have in common.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, whilst the impact of the strategy on the long term viability of radical anti-capitalism may be contested, its instant impact was as part of a general tendency towards an encouragement of a more broad understanding of leftism in the pursuit, first and foremost, of resistance to Fascism, which engendered an environment in which leftist politics moved firmly into the cultural mainstream. In turn, this movement allowed for the unprecedented success of new ventures such as Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club and Allen Lane's politically-focussed Penguin Specials;<sup>110</sup> mass-market politically-engaged non-fiction.

As LeMahieu has argued, the success of publications such as these 'demonstrated once again that in the charged political climate of the 1930s radicalism itself could be successfully commercialized.'<sup>111</sup> The integration of new groups of individuals into freshly acceptable leftist perspectives created a demand for cultural products that informed and nourished those positions, meaning that on some level, anti-capitalism itself was big business. Graham Murdock has argued that 'the Left Book Club like Penguins, offered radical critiques in the form of consumer commodities.'<sup>112</sup> In addition, the success of these businesses represented the characteristic middlebrow practice of synthesising mass culture with middle-class respectability, generating what we can consider a specifically middlebrow variety of political engagement.<sup>113</sup> A.J.P.

<sup>107</sup> John Coombes, 'British Intellectuals and the Popular Front', in *Class, Culture, and Social Change: A New View of the 1930's*, ed. by Frank Gloversmith (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 70–100 (p. 74).

<sup>108</sup> E. P. Thompson, 'Outside the Whale', in *The Poverty of Theory, & Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), pp. 1–35 (p. 17). See also Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge, 1984).

<sup>109</sup> Ronald Blythe, *The Age of Illusion: England in the Twenties and Thirties, 1919-1940* (Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 111.

<sup>110</sup> LeMahieu cites Penguin Specials with 'sales often exceeding 100,00 copies'.

<sup>111</sup> LeMahieu, p. 316.

<sup>112</sup> Graham Murdock, 'Dilemmas of Radical Culture: Forms of Expression and Relations of Production', in *1936: The Sociology of Literature. Vol.2 Practices of Literature and Politics*, ed. by Francis Barker (Colchester: University of Essex, 1979), pp. 21–45 (p. 29).

<sup>113</sup> This point is made by Nick Hubble, 'Imagism, Realism, Surrealism: Middlebrow Transformations in the Mass-Observation Project', in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960*, ed. by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 202–17.

Taylor explicitly refuted any suggestion that this form of consumption should be considered radical: 'The Left Book Club was often regarded as a subversive organization. In reality it was a safety valve. Reading is a substitute for action, not a prelude to it.'<sup>114</sup> In this, we can perhaps detect the position articulated by Walter Benjamin, that demands suspicion of the commercialisation of radical perspectives:

the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication is capable of assimilating, indeed of propagating, an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into the question its own continued existence or that of the class which owns it.<sup>115</sup>

The same suspicion is perhaps also necessary when considering Ambler's novels as leftist products; accepting the polysemy of literary texts involves acknowledgement of the ways in which progressive texts such as these re-affirm dominant ideologies even as they question them.

*The Dark Frontier* was published in 1936, the year after the official adoption of the Popular Front Strategy, and it is through the prism of the Popular Front that we can make sense of the leftism present in this and Ambler's other novels. In their alliances with Zaleshoff, Ambler's protagonists demonstrate a concrete example of the sort of progressive alliances demanded by the Popular Front policy. When Kenton stubbornly refuses to yield to Saridza's demands and Captain Mailler's tortures he expresses his resistance not exclusively to the totalitarian fascism expressed by the villains and their persuasion-by-*totschläger*, but to any force seeking to limit human freedom through violence. For Kenton, giving in to violence would be a repudiation of the core beliefs concealed beneath his cynicism, but at the same time, it is the threat of violence which reveals this core. This is a recurrent behaviour of the Amblerian protagonist; resistance is delayed until it is desperately necessary. In the cold light of day, perhaps, they attempt to roll back from these positions, as when Marlow decides, 'It was time that I pulled myself together and behaved like a reasonable being. It was sheer lunacy to go through with this this plan of

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<sup>114</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, 'Confusion on the Left', in *The Baldwin Age*, ed. by John Raymond (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1960), p. 76.

<sup>115</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 85–104 (p. 94).

Zaleshoff's,<sup>116</sup> but find that their impulsive commitment to righteousness has rendered itself binding; they have compromised their neutrality. What begins as a marriage of necessity then develops into a more committed position, by stealth, as Kenton observes:

Almost imperceptibly, he realized, he had come to regard himself as an ally of Zaleshoff and an opponent of Saridza. The fact that this alignment of sympathies had been brought about largely by Saridza's brutal tactics was beside the point.<sup>117</sup>

Looking back on the 1930s, Orwell stated that 'By 1937 the whole of the intelligentsia was mentally at war. Left-wing thought has narrowed down to "anti-Fascism"'.<sup>118</sup> By necessity, the Popular Front was a defensive formation, hastily assembled to resist Fascism, as indicated by the theme of its 1935 congress, "Writers in Defence of Culture". This defensiveness is characteristic of the leftism of Ambler's novels; his protagonists are not pro-actively anti-capitalist, and are resistant to barbarism more by temperament than principle. Even the heroic figure of Zaleshoff is presented as Soviet with a Popular Front flavour, rather than a distinct departure from liberal humanism. His most impassioned speeches are given in defence of humanity in general, rather than specific pro-Soviet statements, most prominently when he considers Professor Beronelli's madness.

If Ambler's leftism is principally constituted by its Popular Front character and a defensive stance with regards to the rise of Fascism, then it follows that it must be understood as a manifestation of the 'sort of modest radicalism' with which Zaleshoff chides Kenton. By extension, it cannot be argued that it takes the genre of the thriller very far from its traditional position. Certainly it does not support a case for commercial fiction's ability to contribute significantly to a truly radical critique of society. Schimler's speech which valorises theoretical Marxism is prominent and eloquent, but is ultimately incidental to Vadassy's fate; it is an aside rather than a crucial element of the novel's plot. Time and time again, Ambler's novels approach eloquent criticism of the existing capitalist

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<sup>116</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 155.

<sup>117</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 210.

<sup>118</sup> George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 1: An Age like This: 1920 - 1940*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 540–77 (p. 567).

system, but ultimately shy away from wholehearted commitment.

### Armaments, Anti-Capitalism and Espionage Fiction

To understand the variety of resistance to capitalism expressed by Ambler's novels, it is necessary to appreciate its most vehement expression, which takes the form of resistance to armaments manufacturers. Aside from the Zaleshoff siblings, and Colonel Haki, the head of the Turkish secret police who appears in both *The Mask of Dimitrios* and *Journey into Fear*, Ambler's novels do not feature recurring characters; each protagonist only appears once. However, when it comes to more consistent re-appearances, we must look to an armaments firm rather than an individual for a recurrent presence between the novels. In *The Dark Frontier*, Barstow is initially informed of the secret weapon by a representative of the firm Cator and Bliss, who want to acquire the plans for their own use. In *Uncommon Danger*, the photographs being pursued by all parties are a crucial part of a plot by another firm, Pan-Eurasian Petroleum, to incite a coup in Romania and thus gain control of the oil concessions in that country, but it is also revealed that Balterghen, the director of Pan-Eurasian Petroleum, 'holds thirty-five per cent of the ordinary share of Cator and Bliss Limited.'<sup>119</sup> These two companies are thus inextricably linked. Meanwhile, in *Cause for Alarm*, Cator and Bliss is woven subtly but malignantly through the narrative; Vagas' record shows his previous work as an agent for the company in Yugoslavia, whilst in the final scenes, after Marlow has returned to England, we learn that he himself has accepted an offer of work from the company. Finally, in *Journey into Fear*, Graham is a munitions engineer who works directly for Cator & Bliss. So while characters come and go throughout Ambler's novels, the persistence of Cator & Bliss hints at the perceived pervasive influence of armaments manufacturers through the period.

Public discussion around opposition to war revolved around alternatives such as personally committed pacifism, which led to the establishment of the Peace Pledge Union in 1934, as well as the potential for global disarmament and a policy of collective security advanced by the League of Nations. The League of Nations Union itself took the leading role in the organisation of the unofficial, but nevertheless vastly successful, Peace Ballot in 1934-5. This was

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<sup>119</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 23.



a questionnaire sent to every home in Great Britain and producing 11.5 million responses, which, as Helen McCarthy has indicated, represented ‘an estimated 38% of the adult population,’<sup>120</sup> with these responses overwhelmingly in favour of British membership of the League and of the policy of collective security, and though methodological issues were clearly present, the ballot represented, in McCarthy’s description, ‘a highly domesticated and individualised exercise which offered a genuine (if limited) opportunity for voters to engage in an act of political deliberation.’<sup>121</sup> The fourth question on this list related directly to the sale of armaments. It asked: ‘Should the manufacture and sale of armaments for private profit be prohibited by international agreement?’<sup>122</sup> The key point of the question was the opposition to private profit being made on the sale of armaments. As *New Statesman and Nation* had expressed it in their supplement on the Disarmament Conference of 1932, ‘As long as armaments are manufactured for private profits, firms will secure orders, and the vested interest of this armaments class will remain.’<sup>123</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed in texts such as *Patriotism Ltd: An Exposure of the War Machine*,<sup>124</sup> Fenner Brockway’s *The Bloody Traffic*,<sup>125</sup> and William Engelbrecht’s *Merchants of Death: A Study of the International Armaments Industry*.<sup>126</sup> The “merchants of death” themselves were embodied in the figure of Sir Basil Zaharoff, whose infamy was not limited to Britain, despite the majority of his work being conducted for Vickers, a British firm. In continental Europe, for example, this infamy was of such magnitude as to attract parody in Hergé’s 1937 *Tintin* story, *The Broken Ear*<sup>127</sup> as Zaharoff is fictionalised into Basil Bazarov, agent of the Korrupt Arms company,<sup>128</sup> inciting war between two South American nations in order to increase sales. This was an example of his exploits as a ruthless arms dealer who pioneered a specific method, the *Système Zaharoff*, for selling

<sup>120</sup> Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations : Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, C.1918 – 45*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011). p. 29

<sup>121</sup> McCarthy, p. 37

<sup>122</sup> Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 305.

<sup>123</sup> ‘The Manufacture of Armaments’, *The New Statesman and Nation*, 30 January 1932, p. 142.

<sup>124</sup> Union of Democratic Control, *Patriotism Ltd : An Exposure of the War Machine*. (London: Union of Democratic Control, 1933).

<sup>125</sup> Fenner Brockway, *The Bloody Traffic* (London: V. Gollancz, Ltd, 1933).

<sup>126</sup> H. C. Engelbrecht and Frank Cleary Hanighen, *Merchants of Death : A Study of the International Armament Industry* (London: Routledge, 1934).

<sup>127</sup> Hergé, *L’Oreille cassée* (Tournai: Éditions Casterman, 1937).

<sup>128</sup> In the original French, Bazarov’s company is more transparently named the Vicking Arms Co Ltd, in reference to Zaharoff’s real world employer.

weapons to both sides in a conflict, escalating tension to escalate profits.<sup>129</sup> Zaharoff, then, was an example of private arms salesman as a caricature in popular culture; exploitative, profiteering and war-mongering.

In Ambler's novels, armaments are invested with a quasi-magical significance. Barstow's Carruthers episode comes about because of his expertise in a new potential superweapon; Vadassy finds himself in trouble because the photographs found in "his" camera are of naval fortifications; Pan-Eurasian Petroleum is intimately linked with Cator and Bliss through its principal shareholder; Marlow works for Spartacus Machine Tools producing the machinery to produce artillery shells, and is approached by Vagas because Nazi Germany wants to know the technical specifications of Italy's weapons; one of Dimitrios' roles for the Eurasian Credit trust is in the manufacture of an international incident between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia to encourage increased purchase of armaments underwritten by a loan from Eurasian Credit; whilst by the time of *Journey into Fear*, Graham's work for Cator and Bliss shows that even whilst the role of armaments has come full circle to a position of necessity in the defence against fascism, maintaining their near-magical significance, but in the service of civilization, rather than against it.

To an extent, the prominence of armaments firms is a result of the generic affiliation of Ambler's novels. The espionage novel, at least up to the point at which these novels were produced, was almost entirely a domain of international intrigue between states, and thus, as it were, a manifestation of war by other means, as Luc Boltanski has described it:

Spy novels certainly offer glimpses of war, but war carried out under the cover of what appears to be peace. These works indicate what war, covert war, is like in peacetime. Ordinary citizens and even sometimes those responsible for the state, or at least most of them, believe naively that the state is at peace and act accordingly - whereas in fact the state has never ceased to be at war.<sup>130</sup>

As a result of this, armaments are a crucial factor throughout the espionage novel as a means to gain the upper hand in the always theoretically imminent

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<sup>129</sup> Zaharoff infamously sold a practically useless Nordenfeldt steam-driven submarine to Greece and then used Greece's possession of the machine as leverage to persuade Turkey to purchase two further machines. See Anthony Allfrey, *Man of Arms: The Life and Legend of Sir Basil Zaharoff* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), p. 39.

<sup>130</sup> Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 126.

physical war. Every marginal gain in knowledge of new weapons, offensive or defensive plans and the weaknesses of opposition *materiel* is a covert victory in the unceasing war, and so their near-magical status in Ambler's novels is, on the one hand, unremarkable. On the other hand, his insistence on the connection between armaments and capital is not a ubiquitous feature of the genre. Prior to the rise of the Ambler-Greene novel, the espionage novel presents the sale of secrets as enabling the enrichment of individuals on what is, relatively speaking, a minor scale. This provides the title of one of Ambler's novels, *Epitaph for a Spy*, wherein Roux, the eponymous spy, is providing French defence secrets to Italy, not primarily out of a sense of duty but rather because "He needed the money." It was like an epitaph.<sup>131</sup> In Ambler's other novels, however, the enrichment of individuals is only a minor grubby detail. As Symons puts it, they are 'unpleasant but not important men. They murder casually and without passion, on behalf of some immense corporation or firm of armaments manufacturers whose interests are threatened.'<sup>132</sup> In *Uncommon Danger*, Saridza, Mailler, and Borovansky/Sachs are only pawns in a much larger game. Their remuneration is minuscule when put placed in relative scale to the movements of capital pursued by Balterghen. Similarly the economic logic of Spartacus Machine Tools' sales in Italy mean that the bribes offered by Vagas to Marlow can be presented as useful to an individual but insignificant on the scale of the international armaments trade.

With this in mind, perhaps it is necessary to reconsider the anti-capitalism expressed in Ambler's novels. Cator and Bliss, the consistently malevolent presence in the novels, is a synecdoche for capitalism itself, but the simplification involved in such a transformation is extreme. Armaments profiteers are unique inasmuch as they rely directly for profits on the construction of machines for the implementation of death on an industrial scale, or at least the *potential* implementation of death on an industrial scale. Other industries profit from war, certainly, but it is only really in the armaments industry that war, or the possibility of war, is their entire *raison d'être*. In this uniqueness, it is perhaps then tendentious to present this one industry as offering a reasonable avatar for the entire capitalist system, unlike other commodities, for example, the coats and linen, employed by Marx as examples of industrial

<sup>131</sup> Ambler, *Epitaph for a Spy*, p. 219.

<sup>132</sup> Symons, p. 228.

production in *Capital*.

Samuel Hynes has suggested that for the left in the thirties, it was impossible to define a specific enemy, leading to a tendency to generalisation 'as capitalism, imperialism, armaments manufacturers, governments, and, the most emotive term of all, war itself.'<sup>133</sup> In 1937 Arthur Calder Marshall expressed a typical leftist view in stating 'the economic rivalries which are inevitable under capitalism and imperialism are working closer and closer to war,'<sup>134</sup> supporting A.J.P. Taylor's observation that a conspicuous view on the left was that '[Wars] were created by "capitalism"; hence Labour's contribution to peace was to bring capitalism to an end. A refinement of this last view was the doctrine, widely held in the thirties, that wars were deliberately fostered by the private manufacturers of armaments.'<sup>135</sup> Meanwhile, discussing the thriller specifically, LeRoy Panek has noted that in 'the thirties, there is a tendency to fuse the Master Criminal with the armaments manufacturer,'<sup>136</sup> atavistically retaining the figure of the Master Criminal from earlier examples of the genre but merging it with contemporary concerns, and in employing this technique, Ambler's novels display traces of the genre in its earlier form, and are not unique in doing so. In the late thirties, this sort of narrative device was widespread in the espionage genre. Carl Peterson, the master criminal of the first four Bulldog Drummond novels, is replaced in *Bulldog Drummond at Bay* by Ivor Kalinsky, the millionaire who tries to profit from England's lack of preparedness for war. In *Prelude for War*<sup>137</sup>, Leslie Charteris pitched The Saint against armaments manufacturers in league with French fascists; in *Air Disaster* Hammond Innes' journalist-hero, Deveril, finds himself investigating industrial sabotage committed by industrialists, and makes the Zaharoffian observation 'The salesman's motto is just as applicable to armaments as any other industry, I suppose – if there isn't a market, create one.'<sup>138</sup> In Colin Davy's *Agents of the League*, it is stated that 'it is the armaments firms of Europe who pick up the biggest bag of sweets while the nations are fighting. Would it be fantastic m'sieur, to suggest that they rub their hands in satisfaction when mobilization is ordered?'<sup>139</sup> To some extent,

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<sup>133</sup> Hynes, *The Auden Generation*, p. 101.

<sup>134</sup> Arthur Calder-Marshall, *The Changing Scene* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1937), p. 21.

<sup>135</sup> Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945*, p. 360.

<sup>136</sup> Panek, p. 285.

<sup>137</sup> Leslie Charteris, *Prelude for War. A New Saint Story* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938).

<sup>138</sup> Hammond Innes, *Air Disaster*. (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1937).

<sup>139</sup> Colin Davy, *Agents of the League* (London, 1936).

then, we can consider the prominence of the “armaments manufacturer as Master Criminal” trope as a device of “exceptional visibility and appeal”;<sup>140</sup> an evolutionary development finding its niche and enabling the popularity of the genre in the febrile political context of the period. In this sense, it is less a sign of radical political engagement, and more an opportunistic literary curio.

When it comes to Ambler’s novels, however, the application of this device is often supported by expressions of criticism which move beyond simple explanations to complex problems and instead approach criticism of the operation of capitalism as a complex structure. We have already noted that Pan-Eurasian Petroleum, though linked to Cator & Bliss, are after all primarily interested in a separate (though linked) commodity. Marlow’s work in Italy is for Spartacus Machine Tools who only manufacture intermediate elements of the process of creating armaments. When Mathis rails against capitalism in *Journey into Fear*, the ‘blast furnaces that were feeding German guns,’<sup>141</sup> are implicated in the prolongation of the war and the death of French soldiers by the greed of French industrialists, especially Monsieur de Wendel, who gave the order not to attack Briey as he owned ‘the mines and blast furnaces,’<sup>142</sup> involved in the supply chain of armaments manufacture, even if not manufacturing them directly. The clearest attack on this comes in *The Mask of Dimitrios*; Dimitrios is a career gangster who rises through the ranks of petty criminality and intrigue to the highest levels of society and recognition as a director of Eurasian Credit Trust. There are, then, contrasting approaches in Ambler’s novels to the presentation of the leftist perspective. On the one hand, there are the Zaleshoff novels which deliberately identify the leftist perspective with the populist figure of the romantic hero. This, I would argue, is the most straightforward way in which these novels propose and defend a political position. It uses traditional genre practices to invest ideas in a sympathetic figure who is familiar to readers as a positive and forceful archetype, mildly undermining the practices while indulging in them/ On the other hand, outside of the Zaleshoff novels, Ambler presents the leftist perspective in a more subtle manner; explicitly voiced by positively presented, but not generically heroic figures. What unites the novels in their presentation of these perspectives are the moments in which they are

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<sup>140</sup> See “Introduction”.

<sup>141</sup> Eric Ambler, *Journey into Fear* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 77.

<sup>142</sup> Ambler, *Journey into Fear*, p. 77.

presented in isolation from any particular character, but rather as systemic and inherent symptoms of some greater problem. There is a functional difference between Zaleshoff stating that 'Saridza and his kind must be the product of the world business system',<sup>143</sup> and the narrative of *Dimitrios* foregrounding the cause-and-effect hermeneutic of the detective novel, by gradually uncovering the story of Dimitrios' life and at every stage of the causal chain behind Dimitrios' criminal advancement, emphasising the structural connections between capital and gangsterism.

### Conclusion

In an earlier chapter, we considered how Maugham and Mackenzie's espionage novels depicted the impossibility of fidelity to individual human empathy in the reality of espionage, as well as conveying a melancholic sigh for the state of the world which makes that reality necessary. The novels in which they featured represented fundamentally radical generic change but did so entirely from a position of individualist bourgeois liberalism. They generated a critique of war as a cause of misery, but paid no attention to underlying cultural contradictions which were *its* cause. This chapter has investigated how, Ambler's novels, on the other hand, present the argument that this perspective is insufficient to constitute a response to the suffering of the victims of the failures of civilization. Ambler's protagonists generally set out from an ideological position analogous to Ashenden and Waterlow, 'a sort of modest radicalism', but thereafter they are catalysed into action by their inability to remain passive when directly confronted by fascist violence. Ashenden and Waterlow are in relatively privileged, safe positions, working in the service of the state, whereas Ambler's protagonists are vulnerable, exposed and under constant threat of violence. These partial innocents have their naivety violently removed by encounters with reality in the guise of fantasy. What's more, it takes further confirmation and coaching by narrative devices masquerading as characters in order to convince them of what they've seen with their own eyes.

What constitutes the Amblerian protagonists' leftist shift is the realisation of the structural nature of that suffering. Modest radicalism is converted to active resistance through acknowledgement of how capitalism, often in alliance

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<sup>143</sup> Ambler, *Uncommon Danger*, p. 106.

with fascism, encodes that suffering into the structure of society itself. However, as Ralph Harper notes, 'The vertigo experienced by the hero as he looks into the vortex of danger, betrayal, and the kaleidoscope of motive and meaning cannot be borne for long.'<sup>144</sup> The privations of pursuit emphasise the precarity of everyday comforts and enshrine their necessity; Ambler's protagonists cannot bear commitment for long, even after they have recognised its theoretical truth. In this, they provide a metaphor for the operation of radical commercial fiction; the protagonists' desire for a return to normality is necessarily a regressive desire, a desire to retreat from the front line of the struggle and take comfort in their partially realised individual lives under capitalism, but the genuine relief provided by that regressive desire cannot be negated by argument. Individual experience is genuine even if produced under capitalism, just as individual enjoyment of commercial fiction is genuine and cannot be negated by argument. These acts are both progressive and regressive and stage ideological dissonance.

As we have seen, the thirties have consistently been characterised as a decade of political commitment. Ambler's novels demonstrate the double-bind character of this commitment. Violent conversion to the righteous cause is admirable and allows the clarity of vision to recognise the way capitalism structures suffering, but the revolutionary sacrifices necessary to follow through on that conversion are accompanied by painful trials. Ambler's protagonists come face-to-face with the prospect of embodying the barbarism of their enemies in order to win the day. Commitment itself is addressed ambivalently, and whilst a Marxian economic analysis provides a rational explanation for some of society's ills, it is never a panacea. Anti-Fascism, coalesced into the form of the Popular Front, was predicated on the defence of civilization and concomitant opposition to Hitler, Mussolini and Franco, not on an avowed left-wing economic position. In real terms, of course, these positions frequently coincided. In Ambler's novels of the thirties we witness their coincidence as well as a sort of dialectical exchange between them. The leftists are humanists and the humanists leftists.

Additionally, Ambler's "innocents", are also all implicated in the structures of violent society. It is not only critics that have attributed this innocence to

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<sup>144</sup> Harper, p. 70.

Ambler's characters; they claim it for themselves. Marlow is the plainest example of this, repeatedly protesting the impotence of resistance: 'I am merely the agent. I did not create the situation. The responsibility for it is not mine. There is a job to be done. If I do not do it, then someone else will.'<sup>145</sup> Indeed, Lee Horsley has plausibly suggested that this self delusion mirrors a national failure predominant in the period: 'English hands are already dirty, and there is something culpably blind about the national illusion of detachment, something immature about such failures to connect.'<sup>146</sup> Claiming not to be involved in a difficult geopolitical situation whilst also being directly implicated in its occurrence, was (and is) practically an English national past-time. In the case of the Amblerian protagonist, however, subjection to the collective delusion of an ideologically inflected collective myth of a national character of detachment is only part of these stories. More significantly, these novels involve asking difficult questions about this myth, to which answers are always conditional and prone to change.

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<sup>145</sup> Ambler, *Cause for Alarm*, p. 78.

<sup>146</sup> Horsley, *Fictions of Power in English Literature, 1900-1950*, p. 171.



## Chapter 4:

**'it's the books you've read which really give you away'<sup>1</sup> : The**

### **Intertextual Complications of Greene's Thrillers**

#### Introduction

In a discussion of the formation and evolution of genre, Tzvetan Todorov has argued that

The major work creates, in a sense, a new genre and at the same time transgresses the previously valid rules of the genre (...) Yet there is a happy realm where the dialectical contradiction between the work and its genre does not exist: that of popular literature. As a rule, the literary masterpiece does not enter into any genre save perhaps its own: but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre.<sup>2</sup>

The stated tension in this formulation between “the major work” and popular literature is a crucial one with regard to Graham Greene's thrillers, which come pre-packaged with an immanent anxiety with regards to their status as cultural objects. These works match neither of Todorov's poles. They transgress the previously valid rules of genre but do not make claim to be “major works.” They are plainly popular literature but they do not neatly fit their genre. As a result, discussion of these works is practically always accompanied by discussion of Greene's own early-career distinction between “novels” and “entertainments”; between serious works of literature and trivialities. Even following Greene's own repudiation of this division, it continues to draw remark. Furthermore, critics have felt the need to justify lavishing their attention on the works by separating, and thus elevating, them from their counterparts in genre. In an introduction to a collection of critical essays on Greene, Samuel Hynes embodied this tendency:

he can tell a story of dangerous action well; but to say so seems to place him among the gifted story-tellers, somewhere near Ambler and Maugham, and obscures his other and more essential affiliation with James and Conrad and Ford, and the great tradition of the novel as a

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<sup>1</sup>Graham Greene, *The Confidential Agent: An Entertainment* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup>Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. by Richard B. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), p. 43.

work of art.<sup>3</sup>

This is that pervasive desire to divide works between art and not-art; to elevate that special category of Literature from that of mere literature. It is a justification for the exemption of specific examples of commercial fiction from cultural gatekeepers' excoriating overall attack on the field in general. It is not sufficient for Greene's thrillers to function as thrillers, they must instead be contextualised within the frame of something supposedly of greater value, thus Roger Sharrock claims that 'Greene's great technical achievement has been the elevation of the form of the thriller into a medium for serious fiction,'<sup>4</sup> while M.D. Zabel explains away the appeal of the thrillers by direct appeal to association with a more authentically highbrow figure, labelling Greene 'the Auden of the modern thriller.'<sup>5</sup> By extension, the recognition of these works is presented as contingent, and potentially temporary, as per Harold Bloom, who in 1987 was able to ponder, 'Though he is much honored as an eminent contemporary novelist, it is not yet clear that Graham Greene will survive among the greater masters of fiction, rather than among the masterful writers of adventure stories.'<sup>6</sup> That these statuses are not equivalent, and that one is hierarchically superior to the other, is taken as a given.

As we have seen,<sup>7</sup> the literary environment of the thirties, in which Greene produced these works, was sceptical of the potential of mass cultural literature to produce works of any value. The desire to reframe Greene's thrillers is a symptom of that perspective. As Andreas Huyssen has stated, 'as modernism hides its envy for the broad appeal of mass culture behind a screen of condescension and contempt, mass culture, saddled as it is with pangs of guilt, yearns for the dignity of serious culture which forever eludes it.'<sup>8</sup> Greene's thrillers dramatise this dilemma, and their reception stages the dialectical relationship between high art and mass culture; attempts are made to integrate into the acceptance of "art" the cultural products which are subversive of the

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<sup>3</sup>'Introduction', in *Graham Greene: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Samuel Hynes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 1–7 (p. 8).

<sup>4</sup>Roger Sharrock, *Saints, Sinners and Comedians: The Novels of Graham Greene* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1984), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>Morton Dauwen Zabel, 'The Best and the Worst', in *Graham Greene: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Samuel Hynes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 17–79.

<sup>6</sup>'Introduction', in *Graham Greene*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), pp. 1–8 (p. 1).

<sup>7</sup>Above, Chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup>Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 16.

dichotomy. In this process, Greene's thrillers partake of formal experimentation while maintaining the readability of popular forms. As Huyssen continues, 'Mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project,'<sup>9</sup> and Greene's thrillers also exemplify this, borrowing elements from modernism and mass culture in a synthesis, so that, as Barry Menikoff states, 'It would not be an overstatement to say that Greene is one of the earliest modern writers to implicate deliberately both popular and high culture in the formation of political and social consciousness.'<sup>10</sup>

A major part of Greene's method in producing such a synthesis is a further commitment to the quotidian realism of Ambler's novels; a further complicating and de-centring of "fantastic" thriller tropes, resulting in what Martin Green has called the 'antiadventure'.<sup>11</sup> Much of this comes from the stylistic direction taken by the thrillers, which critics have characterised as conveying a realism of tone appropriate to their time, even before consideration of their content. Thus Hynes suggests that 'his novels, particularly those closest to the thriller conventions, are written in a style that seems intentionally flat and impoverished,'<sup>12</sup> while Evelyn Waugh has said that 'the style of writing is grim. It is not a specifically literary style at all. The words are functional, devoid of sensuous attraction, of ancestry and of independent life,'<sup>13</sup> and Graves and Hodge have described this as a 'terse graphic cinematic style.'<sup>14</sup> This tone of grimness and impoverishment contributes to the generic realism specific to the anti-romantic espionage novel, as Peter Widdowson has described; 'a sense of things "as they really are"; not, of course, as historically verifiable, nor as "true", but as, in their own terms, *convincing*.'<sup>15</sup> As such, the events which take place need not be believably mimetic of reality, but the environments, characters and actions represented take place in a recognisable and comprehensible fashion. As Menikoff continues,

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<sup>9</sup>Huyssen, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup>Barry Menikoff, 'Modernist in Search of an Audience: Graham Greene in the Thirties', in *Writers of the Old School: British Novelists of the 1930s*, ed. by Rosemary M. Colt and Janice Rossen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 85–102 (p. 100).

<sup>11</sup>Martin Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 334.

<sup>12</sup>Hynes, 'Introduction', p. 5.

<sup>13</sup>Evelyn Waugh, 'Felix Culpa?', in *Graham Greene: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Samuel Hynes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 95–102 (p. 97).

<sup>14</sup>Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), p. 290.

<sup>15</sup>Widdowson, Peter, 'Between the Acts? English Fiction in the Thirties', in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*, ed. by Jon Clark and others (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), pp. 133–65 (p. 162).

Greene's method is immediately accessible. For it is the very commonness of the references that makes them the perfect representation of their fictional texts. The half-remembered, misquoted, confused, and misunderstood allusions are genuine signs of the characters' experience.<sup>16</sup>

So, in all of Greene's thrillers, as Judith Adamson notes of *A Gun for Sale*, 'What carries the melodrama and connects the levels of imagery is the significance of the detail, the pretended record of actuality. The story is rendered true by the book's documentary surface.'<sup>17</sup> Fantastical narratives are thus conveyed via mundane setting, enlivened by recognition.

This chapter examines how Greene's three major espionage thrillers in this period, *A Gun for Sale*, *The Confidential Agent* and *The Ministry of Fear*, combine this realist style with intertextual construction and ambivalent critiques of modern society to provide internally conflicted perspectives on both popular fictions and on politics. In the first section, it discusses Greene's shift towards the thriller form, beginning with the novel *Stamboul Train*, a text which is partially committed to the espionage thriller form, and touches on how some of Greene's non-thriller works in this period borrow from the form and share the concerns that are expressed when Greene writing in that mode. In the second section, it analyses each of the three subsequent espionage thrillers in turn, identifying their approaches to politics and their approaches to genre. The chapter concludes by considering how Greene's intertextual genre fictions enact generic evolution by insistent questioning of their own validity, and how that same process of insistent questioning in the case of political concerns renders political commitment both necessary and impossible.

### Tentative Thrillers (1932-1935)

In Brian Diemert's comprehensive study, *Graham Greene's Thrillers and the 1930s*, he notes that 'none of the three novels preceding *A Gun for Sale* is a thriller in the way that *A Gun for Sale*, *The Confidential Agent*, *The Ministry of Fear*, or even *Brighton Rock* is, though this is not to say that the earlier books

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<sup>16</sup>Menikoff, p. 99.

<sup>17</sup>Judith Adamson, *Graham Greene: The Dangerous Edge: Where Art and Politics Meet* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 39.

do not make use of certain elements of the thriller.’<sup>18</sup> As such, this chapter is mainly concerned with the latter works, excluding *Brighton Rock*, which is not an espionage narrative. However, the earlier works are worthy of some brief attention as the elements they share with the later works are instructive of the overall position of Greene's thrillers, and the inspiration behind their initial creation is instructive of the temper of Greene's move into the writing of genre fictions.

There were three novels published by Graham Greene before 1932, and while the first, *The Man Within*,<sup>19</sup> was well received, the two which followed, *The Name of Action*<sup>20</sup> and *Rumour at Nightfall*,<sup>21</sup> were not, to the extent that they have since been suppressed by the author and his estate. So the success of the fourth novel, *Stamboul Train*, published in 1932, was to be crucial in establishing Greene's career, and the lessons from that publication are crucial in the other thrillers being written at all. Though I do not wish to repeat the tendency of scholarship on Greene to interpret his work biographically, it is nevertheless interesting to note that in need of financial stability, he deliberately set out to write a commercially successful novel, and by all accounts, in *Stamboul Train*, he succeeded. The book was selected as a Book Society choice, which meant an automatic audience of its 10,000 members,<sup>22</sup> as well as providing the clearest possible designation of the novel's middlebrow status via its official approval by Q.D. Leavis' nemeses. It would also later be adapted for the screen by Twentieth Century Fox as *Orient Express*, partaking in the vogue for railway narratives at the time, which continued throughout the decade, both on screen and on the page with novels like Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*<sup>23</sup> and Ethel Lina White's *The Wheel Spins*,<sup>24</sup> which was the basis for Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Lady Vanishes*.

*Stamboul Train* was described in *The Saturday Review* as 'a modern novel for modern people.'<sup>25</sup> Partially this sense of "modernity" is derived from Greene's narrative technique, a reaction against the emphasis on individual

<sup>18</sup>Brian Diemert, *Graham Greene's Thrillers and the 1930s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), p. 47.

<sup>19</sup>Graham Greene, *The Man Within*. (London: William Heinemann, 1929).

<sup>20</sup>Graham Greene, *The Name of Action*. (London: William Heinemann, 1930).

<sup>21</sup>Graham Greene, *Rumour at Nightfall*. (London: William Heinemann, 1931).

<sup>22</sup>Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene; Volume 1: 1904-1939*, New edn (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 430.

<sup>23</sup>Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* (London: W. Collins, Sons & Co, 1934).

<sup>24</sup>Ethel Lina White, *The Wheel Spins* (London: Collins, 1936).

<sup>25</sup>Anne Armstrong, 'New Novels', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 154.4026 (1932), 673–74 (p. 673).

consciousness characteristic of a high modernist style, combined with what has been called a “cinematic” mode of description, as well as an unashamed frankness with regards to the sexual relations between its characters. The other major contribution to the novel’s “modernity” is its intense topicality. Arthur Calder Marshall later recognised that a significant aspect of Greene’s fiction was its immediate contemporary relevance, asserting that ‘Few living English novelists derive more material from the daily newspaper than Graham Greene;’<sup>26</sup> and *Stamboul Train* is a fine example of this trait. In its discussion of a failed socialist uprising in Eastern Europe, for example, the novel was prescient as it predated Austria’s similar February Uprising of 1934. In addition, in its concern with febrile Continental politics, *Stamboul Train* directly addressed many of the preoccupations of the political upheaval inherent to the *milieu* of the thriller in the thirties, and pre-empted the crucial concerns of the later thrillers. Indeed, by its very nature, criss-crossing borders and concertinaing nations into the space of a single journey, the trans-continental railway journey provides a natural setting for a consideration of the broad range of tensions which were so formative to the thirties thriller, part of the incessant and perpetual re-enactment of the dissolute fallout from the First World War, as Bernard Bergonzi has described:

The peace treaties at the end of the First World War, following the disappearance of the empires of Central Europe, had multiplied the number of nation-states and inscribed many more frontiers across the map. And, whereas before 1914 the existing frontiers of Europe had been only a formality, and could, for the most part, be crossed without travel documents, the post-war frontiers were formidable barriers. They implied passports and visas and armed guards.<sup>27</sup>

As well as mingling nationalities and crossing borders, the journey superimposes economic classes with one another, and its journey across the continent placed the issues of border crossings and national divisions in the foreground of the narrative.

There is no central protagonist to the narrative, which instead

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<sup>26</sup>Arthur Calder Marshall, ‘The Works of Graham Greene’, *Horizon*, May 1940, pp. 367–75 (p. 367).

<sup>27</sup>Bernard Bergonzi, *Reading the Thirties: Texts and Contexts* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 70.

participates in developing what Sharrock has described as 'a modified form of the stream of consciousness technique and multiple points of view [which] became the common stock of popular fiction, particularly the thriller.'<sup>28</sup> The heart of the novel is Czinner, a socialist politician returning to his home country to lead a revolution. It is his presence and actions which lend the novel the flavour of a thriller and produce the elements of suspense. He is an Eastern European socialist revolutionary who has been living in England incognito as a schoolmaster and he is travelling under this cover. Meanwhile, his Baedeker guide to his home town contains a schematic plan of the proposed revolution, transforming it into an instrument of revolution. Further suspense is provided by the entry to the train of a murderer and thief whose presence later complicates Czinner's position.

Ultimately Czinner's journey home is rendered both futile and tragic by the failure of his comrades to wait for his return. The premature revolution is easily defeated and Czinner thus travels only to certain death. Indeed, he cannot even achieve the martyrdom of a public trial and execution to inspire further revolution. Instead he is removed from the train at a desolate Subotica station and summarily executed out of the public eye. Even as he tells the soldiers who arrest him that they represent the past, he can do nothing to usher in his vision of the future, and acknowledges that his vision is intimately connected with a modernity which enables the worst excesses of capitalism: 'How old-fashioned you are with your frontiers and your patriotism. The aeroplane doesn't know a frontier; even your financiers don't recognise frontiers.'<sup>29</sup> His death achieves nothing, and in fact his entire arc within the novel gestures towards a tragically Quixotic diagnosis of his ideals. His elevation by education from the class of his birth isolates him from his parents even as it empowers him. Coral Musker, a precariously employed chorus girl and a representative of the class which Czinner's politics hopes to deliver from suffering, and who Czinner personally helps when she faints, is disgusted by the revelation that he is a Communist, and rather than encouraging any radical change in her, this knowledge instead re-entrenches her working class snobbery. In that moment, she considers herself 'immeasurably above him. She

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<sup>28</sup>Sharrock, p. 45.

<sup>29</sup>Graham Greene, *Stamboul Train* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), p. 149.

was a rich man's mistress and he was a workman.<sup>30</sup> As Panek notes,

[Greene] introduces Coral as a potentially sympathetic character by making her a well-intentioned but lost innocent and by surrounding her with people who are palpably corrupt. By the end of the novel, though, Greene demeans her by spotlighting her alienation from Czinner.<sup>31</sup>

The novel thus presents Czinner's revolutionary ideals as alienated from those they wish to save, while also causing his individual isolation. As we shall see, these themes recur throughout Greene's thrillers.

After *Stamboul Train*, Greene's next two works were even more distinctly removed from the thriller genre, and by his own criteria, were "novels" rather than "entertainments". Yet even at this remove, the traces of the influence of generic thinking are evident in Greene's narratives. The furtive desperation of a pursuit narrative remains a central element; the prominent characters of these novels are always attempting to stay one step ahead of something, whether it is their past, their regrets, their inevitable fate, or some combination of all of these. While this may be indicative of Greene's overall perspective, it manifests as a generic device escaping the bounds of the generic text and finding a home in more literary narratives. As well as the markers of generic influence on these novels, we can identify some clear areas of thematic consistency with the thrillers; ways of seeing the world which are key to Greene's writing in this period regardless of the specific literary context of each text.

*It's a Battlefield* continues the panoramic model of *Stamboul Train*, but moves the panorama from the closed system of the train to the whole of society, or more specifically to the concentric circles of consequence expanding outwards from one man condemned to death for the accidental killing of a policeman at a communist rally. Given this context, it is unsurprisingly concerned with questions regarding the validity of criticism of society as it is, and with the potential of leftist solutions to that criticism. The grimness and poverty which Hynes and Waugh identified as characteristic of Greene's style are very much in evidence not only in form but also in content as we find

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<sup>30</sup>Greene, *Stamboul Train*, p. 132.

<sup>31</sup>LeRoy Panek, *The Special Branch: The British Spy Novel, 1890-1980* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p. 114.



ourselves witnessing life at a matchbox factory, in a prison, at a communist meeting, which, as Judith Adamson notes, 'lend a working-class ambience to the story.'<sup>32</sup>

Communism is presented ambivalently. Drover, the man condemned to death, did not kill out of political commitment but from an impulse to protect his wife, and his suffering does not impact on anyone higher up in the Party. The novel's most prominent Communist figure is the absurd Mr. Surrogate, who 'had complacently passed "through every stage of socialism" until he reached the "lovely abstractions of Communism"'.<sup>33</sup> His supposedly revolutionary politics, however, are simply ineffective gestures. Conversely, Establishment figures express cogent leftist positions. The Assistant Commissioner of Police affirms Marxist theory, when he muses 'the laws were made by property owners in defence of property',<sup>34</sup> while Caroline Bury, a bourgeois lady, famed for her literary salons, asks the most pointed political question in the book:

Do you believe in the way this country is organized? Do you believe that wages should run from thirty shillings a week to fifteen thousand a year, that a manual labourer should be paid less than a man who works with his brains? They are both indispensable, they are both dog-tired at the end of their day.<sup>35</sup>

Out of this, as Michael Brennan argues, Greene presents 'a distinctly jaundiced view of British communism during the early 1930s'.<sup>36</sup> He diagnoses problems in society, again highlighting the alienation of progress in the situation of Conrad, Drover's brother, who is elevated in his work by education but as a result isolated from his colleagues and from his class. Diagnoses such as these are made, but solutions are not offered, and those most clearly offering solutions are undermined as self-serving or misguided.

The final of these three works, *England Made Me*, is the least involved in exploration of generic devices, though it nevertheless shares many concerns in common with the thrillers, as it addresses issues of nationalism and tradition, as well as a preoccupation with questions of modernist artistic expression and its

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<sup>32</sup>Adamson, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup>Graham Greene, *It's a Battlefield* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 43.

<sup>34</sup>Greene, *It's a Battlefield*, p. 169.

<sup>35</sup>Greene, *It's a Battlefield*, p. 189.

<sup>36</sup>Michael G. Brennan, *Graham Greene: Political Writer* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 29.

contrast with popular forms. It also features Krogh, a Swedish capitalist who represents international capital's unfettered power and alienating influence, as well as its employment of violence. In this, Krogh is a precursor to the character of Sir Marcus in *A Gun for Sale* and the influence of the Benditch Colliery Company in *The Confidential Agent*.

### The War Thrillers (1936-1943)

The three espionage thrillers of this period are all novels of war in one way or another, whether directly or indirectly. In this, they meet Widdowson's claim that 'War is the commonest device in Greeneland, not so much actual warfare (...) but the sense of a state of war between powerful and inimical social forces and puny human individuals.'<sup>37</sup> As Gavin Lambert has observed, 'in the frustrating thirties England seems more than ever a remote province, and the mean side street in Athens or Istanbul the true centre,'<sup>38</sup> but in Greene's thrillers, the focus is entirely on England. These are novels which bring conflict onto familiar territory, making clear that war is not remote, but is instead a constant presence.

### *A Gun for Sale*

Following his experimentation with elements of the thriller form in the preceding novels, Greene's next work, *A Gun For Sale*, represents a fully-realized narrative entirely within the tradition of the thriller, and one which is sustained by what Adamson has called 'an atmosphere of doom'; in this context, the novel foregrounds war in a way Greene's previous novels have not. 'The possibility of war is read about in newspapers, shouted out by newsboys, spoken of on radio, and practised for in an air-raid drill. This atmosphere of battle is reinforced by the bleakness of the setting.'<sup>39</sup> Samuel Hynes shares this perspective:

The threat of war fills the novel: characters discuss it, newspaper headlines and hoardings report it, it is uttered in radio broadcasts and written on moving news-signs. But there is another war, too, a war that is less public and newsworthy, but is already going on – the war of the

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<sup>37</sup>Widdowson, Peter, p. 152.

<sup>38</sup>Gavin Lambert, *The Dangerous Edge* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1975), p. 106.

<sup>39</sup>Adamson, p. 38.

powerful against the weak, the rich against the poor, the “big organized battalions” against the loners and outsiders.<sup>40</sup>

In its tale of a mercenary on the run, unable to seek assistance from either his previous criminal employers or from the legitimate authority of the law, the novel is a very clear descendent of Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, but one in which the values and terrain of that novel have been put through a process of moral and physical degradation. Raven, the protagonist of *A Gun for Sale* could barely be less reminiscent of the Hannay, the Clubland hero and Establishment man, and whereas Hannay escapes to the grand vistas of the highlands to evade pursuit by his deadly enemies and the temporary attention of the police, Raven goes to ground in the fogbound urban landscape of Nottwich, a fictional Midlands town, with no hope of redemption or of reprieve from police attention. Raven is hired to carry out the assassination of the Czech Minister for War and does so, though it is not this act which precipitates his pursuit, but rather the fact that his payment is made in counterfeit bills, which draws attention to him when he attempts to spend them. Wanted by the police, he escapes on the night train to Nottwich. In Nottwich he is determined to find those who hired him and have his revenge.

As previously discussed,<sup>41</sup> it was not uncommon in the thirties to equate armaments manufacturers with the role of the master criminal in generic fiction. *A Gun for Sale* shares this characteristic inasmuch as Raven is hired by Sir Marcus, elderly head of Midland Steel, in order to incite war and thus increase the manufacture of armaments and demand for steel. In this we can detect the influence of the mindset implied by the *Systeme Zaharoff*. That is, profiteering by encouraging conflict. Indeed, Sir Marcus bears various resemblances with the real life Zaharoff, including his non-specific ethnic history and the Establishment legitimation implied by his honorific. In this parallel, there is also the similarity to be drawn with Ambler's profiteering armaments firms, led by Cator and Bliss, and by extension, the same political condemnation of capitalism in general and armaments in particular. In further parallel with Ambler, we can perhaps consider Sir Marcus to be a version of Dimitrios carried

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<sup>40</sup>Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 233.

<sup>41</sup>See above, Chapter 3

to its logical conclusion, even down to the reminiscent description of his vague history:

His name did not appear in *Who's Who*, and an enterprising journalist who once tried to write his life found extraordinary gaps in registers: it wasn't possible to follow any rumour to its source. There was even a gap in the legal records of Marseilles where one rumour said that Sir Marcus as a youth had been charged with theft from a visitor to a bawdy house.<sup>42</sup>

As such, Sir Marcus' elevated position, a status revealed to be literal when Raven eventually tracks him down to his study on the very top floor of the Midland Steel building, is shown to be derived from a questionable and deliberately concealed past. Capitalist success and accumulation is a product of barely hidden criminality. In this, in addition to the Popular Front flavour of assigning villainy to his profiteering warmongering, Sir Marcus as an individual also physically represents a condemnation of his industry and outlook. As Neil McEwan observes, 'a socialist reader in 1936 might well have seen this character's extreme old age and physical frailty, wheelchair and hoarse whisper, as signs of the current state of capitalism.'<sup>43</sup> Beyond his physical characteristics, Greene also presents Sir Marcus' appetites as a combination of deviance and unpleasant asceticism, he is 'a man almost without pleasures'<sup>44</sup>, devoted to the accumulation of wealth for no humanly comprehensible reason.

As a protagonist, Raven makes for a curious experiment in the thriller form inasmuch as he contains a variety of the elements of narrative subversion that Greene brings to the genre. In his conduct throughout the pursuit which constitutes the majority of the text, he is shown to be brutal and violent, and yet he is the character with whose fate we are invested. As this central character, in the thriller tradition, he would be positioned as the story's hero, and as such, we are invited to share in his perception of his victimization by society even as we witness his crimes, beginning with the assassination of the Minister of War, which he accomplishes alongside the unintended but brutal murder of the Minister's secretary as a witness to the crime, and continuing in Nottingham as Raven takes Anne, a chorus girl, hostage. As Maria Couto has noted, 'The

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<sup>42</sup>Graham Greene, *A Gun for Sale* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 109.

<sup>43</sup>Neil McEwan, *Graham Greene* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 116.

<sup>44</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 108.

empire of capitalism is exposed with a hero who is ugly and deformed. His only sense of purpose provoked by a deep and sullen rage rather than by heroism; his courage is despair.<sup>145</sup>

Whereas Sir Marcus' past is obscured, Raven's is an unconcealable wound which determines his entire being and is the root of his "sullen rage." At every turn, we are confronted by the causes of Raven's violence; we learn of the visceral horror of his parents, 'His mother had borne him when his father was in gaol, and six years later when his father was hanged for another crime, she had cut her own throat with a knife,'<sup>146</sup> of his painful, lonely upbringing as an orphan thereafter. Raven's violence is plainly a demonstration that "social being determines consciousness", as a Marxist would put it. However, this demonstration is complicated by the fact that Sir Marcus and the Minister of War are also orphans, and from their parallel, though presumably less horrific, origins to Raven, have ended up in entirely different positions. Raven, though, is consumed by the internalisation of his exile from the rest of society, which is manifest in his obsession with what he considers to be the physical horror of his harelip. With his counterfeit bills he tries to purchase corrective facial surgery on the black market to evade his pursuers, but tellingly, Doctor Yogel, the doctor he goes to has earned his reputation by performing illegal abortions. Raven's self-destructive nature, his desire to fundamentally no longer exist, is thus made clear.

The incident with Yogel illustrates a major theme of the novel in confirming to Raven the rightness of his refusal to trust anyone but himself. He is betrayed by his parents' abandonment, by society's failure to provide tenderness, and then at the outset of the novel, he is betrayed by his employers; by the criminal class to which he belongs: 'for the second time in one day he had been betrayed by his employers. He had always been alone, but never so alone as this.'<sup>147</sup> This betrayal is nothing more than another episode in a catalogue of such events, and as the narrative develops his isolation and loneliness simply multiplies; soon after this he is betrayed by his landlord, who gives him away to the pursuing police. All of this treachery contributes to and finally confirms his perspective that 'There was no one outside your own brain

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<sup>145</sup>Maria Couto, *Graham Greene: On the Frontier: Politics and Religion in the Novels* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 55.

<sup>146</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 66.

<sup>147</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 29.

whom you could trust: not a doctor, not a priest, not a woman.<sup>148</sup>

The implacability of Raven's belief in betrayal is tested by his interactions with Anne. After retrieving her from a chimney and so rescuing her from attempted murder committed by Sir Marcus' representative, she becomes a victim of society's failures too. They have this in common, as Brennan notes, the rescue makes her 'a kindred spirit, now like himself cruelly abused by the world.'<sup>149</sup> Along with Anne's naturally sympathetic perspective, this shared suffering creates a sense of solidarity which undermines Raven's commitment to his philosophy of constant betrayal. His impossible quest, of one man against the whole of society, embodied in the employer who betrayed him, is maintained in its righteous fury by his absolute isolation from that society, but Anne's sympathy is a tenuous connection back to society, a reason to temper his rage. He warns himself against trust, reminds himself of the inevitability of betrayal, and is eventually proved correct in his warning as Anne gives him up at the last, though she comes to regret that choice. Perversely, loyalty is Raven's religion, and in our post-lapsarian world, the inevitability of betrayal is his original sin; committed first by his parents, and later society at large. As Brennan observes, 'no salvation is possible for him because of his unwavering self-image as a brutalized scapegoat for the sins of his narrow, tawdry world.'<sup>150</sup> His creed is so extreme that the idea of an apocalyptic war is irrelevant, other than in its generalisation of the truth heretofore only available to society's victims, such as himself:

I don't give a damn if there's a war or not. I only want to know who it is that double-crossed me (...) "A war won't do people any harm," he said, "It'll show them what's what, it'll give them a taste of their own medicine. I know. There's always been a war for me."<sup>51</sup>

As a man who lives within the constant reality of betrayal, he is horrified at his own actions only when he learns they construe an unwitting betrayal of their own. The assassination of the Minister of War is, from Raven's perspective, not morally wrong in the abstract, but comes to be understood that way via Raven's

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<sup>48</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 168.

<sup>49</sup>Michael G. Brennan, *Graham Greene: Fictions, Faith and Authorship* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 43.

<sup>50</sup>Brennan, *Graham Greene*, p. 46.

<sup>51</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 47.

distorted epistemology of solidarity for those of his class, those he perceives to share his victimhood. Before he learns the truth, he justifies the murder as comeuppance for privilege, 'He felt no guilt about the old War Minister. He was one of the great ones of the world,'<sup>52</sup> but after he learns the truth, he feels remorse, and states 'I didn't know the old fellow was one of us. I wouldn't have touched him if I'd known he was like that.'<sup>53</sup> He acts similarly in his show of compassion towards a stray kitten at his lodgings, as its vulnerability and isolation encourage acts of tenderness in him which are absent elsewhere. Shoko Miyano has described this as a 'primal sense of justice and injustice, characterized by a sense of fellowship based on class-consciousness.'<sup>54</sup> Class, in these terms is not entirely economic, but is simply defined in terms of privilege and entitlement. Raven conceives of life as a war and himself as a soldier on the side of the class of those eternally double-crossed by existence. These signs of weakness in Raven's violent perspective engendered both by his sense of solidarity and by Anne's attention work to evoke our sympathy, compounding that generated by our perception of his isolation, but also increasing the tragedy of his inevitable fate by indicating alternative trajectories to violent revenge.

The political perspective of *A Gun for Sale* foregrounds the parallel violence of Raven as the individual victim of the capitalist society with the general violence of war promulgated by that system, as Adamson notes: 'Greene juxtaposes the delinquency of the small criminals with the villainy of the industrial magnates in such a way that the misdemeanours of the proletariat of crime.'<sup>55</sup> In this, it is straightforwardly anti-capitalist. Society is presented as incapable of bringing Sir Marcus to justice despite his actions being intended to incite conflagration on an international scale, while the fatal conclusion of Raven's quest for revenge is inevitable, one way or another. As such, Raven's actions are more than proportional even as we reject his extreme violence. This unmediated violence, inflicted directly on the withered body politic of capitalism in crisis, thus cannot be tolerated even as we recognise an element of its righteousness.

On the larger scale of international conflict, Anne, as the moral centre of

<sup>52</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 91.

<sup>53</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 129.

<sup>54</sup>Shoko Miyano, *Innocence in Graham Greene's Novels* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2006), p. 26.

<sup>55</sup>Adamson, p. 22.

the novel, is the only character to feel deeply the dread of war. When she sees a headline that presages war, it 'lay like a weight on her heart.'<sup>56</sup> The idea of war, and by extension, apocalypse, only has meaning for those who are connected to others in society. Raven and Sir Marcus are isolated, one by poverty and the other by avarice, and so neither has anything to lose by war. However, Anne's awareness of the terrible consequence of war does not survive the novel. *A Gun for Sale* allows Anne the sort of closure typical of the formula novel; she has her man, though she is not so sure of him as she was, and even her fear of war is undermined by her radical destabilisation: 'Perhaps even if she had been able to save the country from war, it wouldn't have been worth the saving.'<sup>57</sup> War has been averted, but there is no dissipation of the sense that it is both inevitable and imminent. Anne experiences the return journey to London with fresh eyes, exposed to the reality of conflict under the surface of society: 'This was war too: this chaos through which the train moved slowly, grinding over point after point like a dying creature dragging itself painfully away through No-Man's land from the scene of a battle.'<sup>58</sup> In this, the novel explores the impossibility of peace; even Anne is dragged into realization of Raven's perspective. The idea that society is improvable is rejected at every turn, as Anne's positive perspective is invalidated, and extends to the suburban false utopia of Cozyholmes where Raven hides out. As McEwan has observed, these houses, 'which speculative builders are offering on hire-purchase (...) represent – worse than poverty - "the meanness of spirit".'<sup>59</sup>

In addition to its primary political concerns, *A Gun for Sale* also makes tentative examinations of the generic devices involved in the espionage thriller. This is accomplished through the presentation of the police pursuit of Raven. The police are led by Mather, who is coincidentally romantically involved with Anne. As a representative of law and order, Mather desires predictability, 'he liked to feel that he was working for a concrete end – not equality of opportunity, not government by the people or by the richest or by the best, but simply to do away with crime which meant uncertainty.'<sup>60</sup> By extension, the Nottwich police impose the predictability of formula stories on their work, bemoaning the points

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<sup>56</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 10.

<sup>57</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 183.

<sup>58</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 182.

<sup>59</sup>McEwan, p. 117.

<sup>60</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 38.



at which life falls short of fiction, such as the fact 'In these stories you read people always remember something, but in real life they just say she was wearing something dark or something light,'<sup>61</sup> and insisting on reinterpreting their experience through generic form in insisting that Anne is referred to as a "moll" 'Like in these gangster stories.'<sup>62</sup> These adherences to formulaic fictions allow Mather, unaware he is speculating about his own partner, to confidently construct a description of the "moll" from very little evidence: 'one of those girls who like being treated rough. Sort of clinging and avaricious, I picture her.'<sup>63</sup> Even in these tentative explorations, then, the novel emphasises both how the presence of generic proficiency enlivens the experience of these men, and how it can provide perspectives which reduce complex situations to simplified reifications.

### *The Confidential Agent*

Greene, unlike Ambler, was of sufficient standing in the cultural world of 1936 to be included in *Left Review's* survey of notable authors' feelings on the Spanish Civil War, but despite his inclusion in the ballot, he did not respond.<sup>64</sup> The issue of the Civil War was a crucial rallying point for the left at this time, reams of paper were devoted to discussion of the rights and wrongs, and many committed individuals went to Spain to fight. In a column for *The Spectator*, Greene said "'With all my anger and love, I am for the People of Republican Spain"—that is not the kind of remark that anyone with a sense of the ludicrous should make on this side of the Channel.'<sup>65</sup> As Katharine Hoskins has noted, his public comments were limited to what 'might be expected of him, a certain contempt for the lofty and sometimes inflated rhetoric the war evoked.'<sup>66</sup>

Despite this public scepticism, Greene addressed the Spanish Civil War directly in his 1939 novel, *The Confidential Agent*. He does not specify the country by name, and gives its representatives in England only their initial letters, so as to avoid committing to specificities, but nevertheless, it is obvious what is intended. In this context, where *A Gun for Sale* addresses the

<sup>61</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 75.

<sup>62</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 76.

<sup>63</sup>Greene, *A Gun for Sale*, p. 76.

<sup>64</sup>Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 33.

<sup>65</sup>Graham Greene, 'Alfred Tennyson Intervenes', *The Spectator*, 10 December 1937, p. 1058.

<sup>66</sup>Katharine Bail Hoskins, *Today the Struggle: Literature and Politics in England during the Spanish Civil War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), p. 36.

imminence of war, *The Confidential Agent* addresses a war which is ongoing, but distant, and heralds further conflict. The novel takes place in England, but it is an England characterised by an uncanny combination of foreignness and familiarity, a combination which has leads to a sort of off-kilter dissonance, and to its apt description by Roger Sharrock as 'a strangely phantasmagoric thriller.'<sup>67</sup> Things are both not what they seem, but are also exactly what they seem, which in itself provides shock.

The novel concerns the attempts by "D.", a representative of the Republican government of the unnamed country to purchase supplies of coal in England to support the continuing war effort against a Nationalist revolt. D. is not a professional agent, but given his experience as a scholar in England is sent as an amateur nevertheless. The most startling characteristic of D. is his self awareness that he is almost physically infected by the war in which he is a reluctant participant. From the very first page of the narrative, he is astounded that ordinary life continues outside of his war, or rather, he is astounded that ordinary life continues around him even while he cannot escape the sense of war: 'He carried the war with him. Wherever D. was, there was war.'<sup>68</sup> However, the novel also presents an alternative perspective which externalises D.'s contagion, suggesting his self-conscious attribution is not strictly accurate. Rose Cullen, daughter of the coal magnate that D. is in England to see, punctures his illusion by stating that 'it doesn't need a war to flatten things. Money, parents, lots of things are just as good as war'<sup>69</sup> and chastising him, 'Don't be melodramatic (...) I can't stand melodrama.'<sup>70</sup> Later, Benditch, the depressed mining town that D. visits is described as 'like war, but without the spirit of defiance war usually raised.'<sup>71</sup> War is all pervasive; its influence seeps into all forms of conflict, of whatever scale. Indeed, the daily fight of those not at war is a constant presence throughout the novel. D. considers himself to have brought the war with him, that he is 'an infected man. Violence went with him everywhere.'<sup>72</sup> In reality, however, he is simply acknowledging the conflict which constantly occurs below the surface, visible only to the eye attuned to it:

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<sup>67</sup>Sharrock, p. 77.

<sup>68</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 9.

<sup>69</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 19.

<sup>70</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 19.

<sup>71</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 161.

<sup>72</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 99.

the cheap prostitutes sat hopelessly in the shadows, and the blackmailers kept an eye open on the grass where the deeds of darkness were quietly and unsatisfactorily accomplished. This was technically known as a city at peace.<sup>73</sup>

The city is technically at peace, as long as one does not examine it too closely. Entropic decay gnaws constantly at the edge of life and the illusion of peace requires the vigilance of constant ideological reaffirmation by the hegemonic forces which are invested in keeping the individual in that state of delusion. Literal war only accelerates collapse, as the novel observes, 'Bombardment was a waste of time. You could attain your ruined world as easily by just letting go.'<sup>74</sup> By extension, prolonged life in the delusion of peace imposes further delusion, 'they were robbed of reality by their complacent safety.'<sup>75</sup> D.'s exposure to war grants him the clarity to see the war in the quotidian details of existence, such as Rose's distrust of her fiancée, which precipitates an extended meditation on the delusion of peace:

He gave up: this wasn't peace. When he landed in England he had felt some envy...there had been a casualness...even a certain sense of trust at the passport control, but there was probably something behind that. He had imagined that the suspicions which was the atmosphere of his own life was due to civil war, but he began to believe that it existed everywhere: it was part of human life. People were united only by their vices; there was honour among adulterers and thieves. He had been too absorbed in the old days with his love and with the Berne MS. and the weekly lecture on Romance Languages to notice it. It was as if the whole world lay in the shadow of abandonment.<sup>76</sup>

Hoskins has stated '*The Confidential Agent* is not a "political novel"; the Spanish War simply provides a situation within which Greene can work out a theme, D.'s discovery of love and trust in a world oppressive with treachery and suspicion.'<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, though the conflict in *A Gun For Sale* reflects that which occurred in Spain, along with its political divisions of left and right mapped onto Republican and Nationalist factions, D.'s commitment to his side is not primarily a political one, and the political implications of each side are not

<sup>73</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 136.

<sup>74</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 160.

<sup>75</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 128.

<sup>76</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 64.

<sup>77</sup>Hoskins, p. 40.

explored significantly in the novel, although clearly D.'s side are presented sympathetically. The allegiances of D. and L., his counterpart from the other side, have practical effects such as access to funds, which allows L. to travel in greater comfort than D., but it is the conflict itself which is crucial to the narrative, not the ideological nuances of either position. Indeed, D. is not a fanatic and has grave misgivings about his cause, 'After all, there were aspects of economic materialism which, if he searched his heart, he did not accept.'<sup>78</sup> The notion that a political creed can provide a genuine solution is belittled by D.'s awareness of the multiplicity of configurations of beliefs: 'Now there were so many varieties of economic materialism, so many initial letters.'<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, as L. reminds him, D.'s security with his own side is precarious; he is condemned by his class background to remain a partial outsider, regardless of his beliefs: 'They'll never trust you – you are a bourgeois.'<sup>80</sup>

The understanding of the conflict which D. presents is thus of humanist sympathy rather than ideological commitment, but a humanist sympathy which is suspicious of the grandiose claims of Enlightenment liberalism: 'It was worth killing a civilization to prevent the government of human beings falling into the hands of – he supposed they were called the civilized.'<sup>81</sup> In this he cannot escape awareness of the imperfections of his own faction, as he states, 'It's no good taking a moral line. My people commit atrocities like the others. I suppose if I believed in God it would be simpler.'<sup>82</sup> As such, he longs not simply for a God, but for any comprehensive structuring belief system which would absolve him of individual responsibility, would subsume him to a collective project or to a teleology of eternal reward. In such a structure of ideological uncertainty, however, belief becomes a choice: 'You've got to choose some line of action and live by it. Otherwise nothing matters at all,'<sup>83</sup> but no matter what the belief is, D. is 'damned like a creative writer to sympathy,'<sup>84</sup> and so can never fully embrace commitment.

Despite D.'s perspective of political ambivalence, the novel is nevertheless committed to a presentation of the political repercussions involved

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<sup>78</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 10.

<sup>79</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 56.

<sup>80</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 29.

<sup>81</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 30.

<sup>82</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 60.

<sup>83</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 60.

<sup>84</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 140.

in his war which lean leftwards. Where *A Gun for Sale* has Sir Marcus' Midland Steel company, *The Confidential Agent* represents corporate capitalism in the Benditch Colliery Company. D.'s mission is to persuade Lord Benditch's company to provide coal to his side of the war, rather than the rebels, in order to provide fuel for their tanks. They have more than enough vehicles, but not enough fuel to operate them. In this, the company's relation to the war is oblique; they are not encouraging war in the manner of Sir Marcus, but they are parasitical to it. Economic factors mean the colliery is stopped, the workers are desperate to return to work, and the need for coal in a foreign war provides the opportunity to do so. As was the case in *A Gun For Sale*, the workers are implicitly complicit in profits made on war.

The novel actively presents the dilemma of the coal's destination. The Miners' Union is resolved not to supply coal to the rebels; in its parallel with the Spanish Civil War, the rebels are opposed to socialism and by extension, to the work of organisations like the Miners Union, and D. asserts that the miners in his home country 'won't work for them. They shoot them, but they won't work...'<sup>85</sup> However, the commitment of the English miners to the resolution in the name of international solidarity is reduced to a charade when faced with the possibility of returning to work; it takes only a transparently mendacious promise from Lord Benditch's agent that the coal is bound for Holland to assuage the union's conscience. As a woman in the crowd shouts: 'Charity begins at 'ome.'<sup>86</sup> Thus D.'s attempts to persuade the miners to refuse to work leads to a situation in which 'he walked against a growing tide of hope.'<sup>87</sup> The complicity of the miners arises from their daily fight to survive.

The failure of the Miners Union to live up to its commitments hints at a condition of failure which *The Confidential Agent* presents repeatedly. As LeRoy Panek has observed, 'There can be no revolution, now or ever. The raw material, Greene shows us constantly, simply is not there.'<sup>88</sup> The final, bathetic, act which leads at least to the cancellation of the deal is fabricated almost by accident when D. encounters a gang of local youths, willing to cause an explosion and put the mine out of service in exchange for D.'s revolver and its single bullet. A practically random act of arbitrary violence and destruction,

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<sup>85</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 169.

<sup>86</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 170.

<sup>87</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 165.

<sup>88</sup>Panek, p. 115.

crafted from a combination of adolescent nihilism and machine worship proves more effective than the supposed alliance of international socialism. D.'s failure to commit to a utopian teleology is replicated throughout the text. Alongside its bleak atmosphere of war, a major theme of *The Confidential Agent* is a thoroughgoing suspicion of Utopian projects. As we have seen, D. himself is on a mission from a radical progressive government but is nevertheless under constant surveillance and unsure of the soundness of his cause. Similarly, we are presented with numerous examples of modern projects conceived on the notion of improvement and perfectibility, with each undermined by its content. Another guest in D's London hotel, Mr. Muckerji, works as a Mass Observer but is presented as intrusive and seedy. Even as he collects data towards the goal of Mass Observation, the Utopian project is undermined by human prurience; spying on the hotel's chambermaid through the keyhole. Even more damning is the characterisation of the Entrentiano language school, which is not only ineffective, but a site of suspicion and petty jealousy. We see the theme repeated once more in the modern resort town where D. hides out before leaving the country. The resort is constructed to mimic the microcosm ideal society of a cruise ship, but nevertheless is a site of a vigilantly patrolled honesty box. In the face of the bewildering incomprehensibility of modernity, these utopian projects are nothing but baseless dreams, justifying Baldrige's assertion that 'Christians, like Marxists, are expected to look forward to such an epoch [of teleological fulfilment] with joy and longing, but as it happens Greene views both these supposed utopias with something verging on horror.'<sup>89</sup>

In addition to interrogating utopias, the novel is invested in interrogating genre. As an amateur agent, D. is doomed to process his exploits as an agent via the tools with which he is equipped from elsewhere. A major element of D.'s nostalgic comfort with the idea of England is his previous career as a Professor of Romance Languages, specifically as an expert on the medieval text *The Song of Roland*. He discusses his work wistfully, and contrasts his pleasant memories of the British Museum Reading Room with his current paranoid experience of London. After all is said and done, however, the *Song of Roland* is a war narrative. D. relates a section of the manuscript to Rose which is concerned with the specificities of Roland's last stand and the implications for

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<sup>89</sup>Cates Baldrige, *Graham Greene's Fictions: The Virtues of Extremity* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2000), p. 170.

the reader's perception of his honour based on discrepancies between manuscripts. In the rose-tinted past of pre-war days, D. was invested, on a purely theoretical level, in the very questions of honour and conduct in war, via an adventure narrative, which he now rejects as unsuitable to real war.

D.'s greatest achievement as a scholar was the uncovering of an alternate manuscript source for the story, and this discovery offers a telling perspective on the questions of honour and conduct which these kinds of narratives involve. In D.'s alternative, Oliver, Roland's loyal companion, rather than accidentally killing his friend with a random blow, deliberately chooses to do so out of rage at the hubris of the 'big boasting courageous fool' when Roland refuses to blow his horn to summon reinforcements from Charlemagne because he set more store by glory than victory. D. is thus emotionally invested in the replacement narrative which dramatically works to undermine notions of self-sacrifice and glory. Nevertheless, he remains haunted by such notions throughout the novel, even as he is insistently aware of their shortcomings.

As an inexperienced agent D. has the same fictive references as any other middlebrow reader; melodrama, thrillers and detective stories. But as a man who has lived through real war, he is also aware of the limits of these readings, 'That's the kind of argument they use in stories. It doesn't apply any more these days. There's a war on.'<sup>90</sup> Yet even as he denies the validity of these perspectives, he lives out their expression. As Diemert notes,

The difficulty with this position is that the fiction one chooses determines one's experiences of the world. In D.'s case, his choice of a side, of an ideology, brings him into a world of melodramatic conflict where all things are perceived as being involved in that conflict (...) because D. reads the world as a melodrama or thriller, the text foregrounds his status as a melodramatic character.<sup>91</sup>

Thus when Else, a chambermaid working at D.'s hotel, is murdered, D. reverts to the fictional forms he has theoretically rejected, and thinks in cliché: 'A dull rage stirred him. He had been pushed around like a lay figure long enough; it was time he began to act. If they wanted violence let them have violence,'<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 136.

<sup>91</sup>Diemert, p. 147.

<sup>92</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 104.

'they had pushed him around (...) it was his turn now.'<sup>93</sup> Unlike Ambler's protagonists, who deny the reality of the violence of the real, right up to the point at which it is no longer deniable, D. begins from a position of acquiescence to that violence and though he tries to resist its logic, it is ultimately unavoidable.

In terms of genre literacy, then, D. begins from a position of some advantage. He is watchful and suspicious from the very outset; every meeting is a potential moment of violence or betrayal. His hyperawareness of his situation is, however, a self-fulfilling mode of interpreting the world. Whilst this provides protection from the danger which genuinely lurks around many corners, it also creates a melodramatic romance which ensnares others and drags them into the violence. D. befriends Else, and takes comfort from her idolization of him, even as he is disturbed by her bleak life prospects. Nevertheless, he weaponizes her innocence and devotion; entrusting vital documents to her for safekeeping, and involving her in his war, actions which lead to her murder. Similarly, the romantic melodrama of his doomed task is what attracts Rose Cullen to him and curses her to travel back with him to his country and into war.

The characters who come into D.'s orbit are also at the mercy of the textual codes they use to interpret the world. D. takes it as a comfort that L. is as inexperienced as he is, and is working from the same fictive references:

people didn't fall for that sort of thing except in melodrama. In melodrama a secret agent was never tired or uninterested or in love with a dead woman. But perhaps L. read melodramas – he represented, after all, the aristocracy – the marquises and generals and bishops – who lived in a curious formal world of their own.<sup>94</sup>

Each character is vulnerable to this process. Else's devotion to D. stems from her impression that he is a proper gentleman but in her impoverished existence, her ideas of behaviour come from the fictions she reads, 'novelettes which had conditioned her speech,'<sup>95</sup> as D. acknowledges, 'God knew out of what twopenny trash she drew her vocabulary.'<sup>96</sup> Again, her commitment to him,

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<sup>93</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 140.

<sup>94</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 53.

<sup>95</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 114.

<sup>96</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 70.



generated out of the romantic illusions of her reading habits, condemns her to death by involving her in his melodrama. Rose, on the other hand, claims to reject melodrama, even as she is attracted to it, 'I don't believe it. I won't believe it. Don't you see that if things like that happened life would be quite different? One would have to begin over again,'<sup>97</sup> 'But it's fantastic. How could they shoot at you in the street – here?'<sup>98</sup>

Conversely, D. cannot even claim to really resist melodrama; it is how he has chosen to structure his existence, framing political commitment as a choice between alternative fictions, and so, as Diemert notes, D. lives within the paradox that

any text will always contain the "heresies" that prohibit unquestioning acceptance of a single revealed reading or interpretation. His scepticism carries with it the ideological consequence of any kind of action being impossible as the subject freezes between two poles, uncertain even of the self.<sup>99</sup>

D. is thus trapped by his readings and by his ambivalences, acting out hollow resistances and achieving nothing, all the while mourning the loss of his own pre-war world. His great tragedy is that in living through melodrama he has seen through to the incipient violence of even peaceful societies; an irreversible realisation.

### *The Ministry of Fear*

Of Greene's thrillers written in this period, *The Ministry of Fear* is the one which most directly confronts the reality of war, and as such, it is less interested than the other thrillers in economic politics *per se*. Judith Adamson has suggested that the outbreak of war relieved some of Greene's personal ambivalence: 'The war seemed to relieve the temporary tension of watching everything collapse and having no way to stop it. In a sense, the war offered Greene temporary shelter (...) for its immediacy took over the critical political debate.'<sup>100</sup> Through the loose trilogy of thrillers discussed in this chapter, war

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<sup>97</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 59.

<sup>98</sup>Greene, *The Confidential Agent*, p. 59.

<sup>99</sup>Diemert, p. 146.

<sup>100</sup>Adamson, p. 76.

moves from the imminent future to the present, and then from a foreign land to England itself. *The Ministry of Fear* is thus a novel of the London blitz in which the war is neither impending nor foreign, as in *A Gun For Sale* and *The Confidential Agent*; it is here and it is now. Nevertheless, as with Greene's other protagonists, Arthur Rowe, the central character of *The Ministry of Fear* is engaged in a private war. In his case, he is in internal conflict over his own previous actions; by the moral code which led to his decision to end his wife's chronic pain by taking her life himself. Meanwhile, the external reality of the Second World War encroaches. Rowe finds himself directly involved in conflict via the initial MacGuffin of a microfilm hidden in a fruit cake which he wins at a fête, and which he unwisely keeps due to its inflated status as a prize due to rationing and the fact that the cake is 'made with real eggs,'<sup>101</sup> a fact which in times of peace is trivial, but in war, generates an object of totemic significance; a neat modelling of the process any MacGuffin undergoes. Keeping the microfilm involves Rowe in a Nazi fifth-columnist conspiracy, which precipitates his framing for murder and his unwilling conscription into secret war.

Rowe's central strategy for processing the events he finds himself embroiled in is through previously encountered texts; the closest analogues to his situation are fictive, as he remarks in a dream encounter with his dead mother:

I'm wanted for a murder I didn't do. People want to kill me because I know too much. I'm hiding underground, and up above the Germans are methodically smashing London to bits all round me. (...) It sounds like a thriller, doesn't it, but thrillers are like life – more like life than you are, this lawn, your sandwiches, that pine. You used to laugh at the books Miss Savage read – about spies, and murders, and violence, and wild motor-car chases, but dear, that's real life: it's what we've all made of the world since you died. I'm your little Arthur who wouldn't hurt a beetle and I'm a murderer too. The world has been remade by William Le Queux.<sup>102</sup>

As this suggests, in his involvement with conspiracy, murder and pursuit, for Rowe the pastoral idyll of childhood has become less "real" than the extraordinary world of the thriller, and as a reasonable man, he is unprepared

<sup>101</sup>Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 17.

<sup>102</sup>Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 65.

for this change. *The Ministry of Fear* is credible because its fantastic events take place in wartime, but given Greene's other thrillers, it also understands that war is not a temporary state and these fantastic events are no longer abnormal. Rowe is thus haunted by the dissonance of war occurring in the everyday setting of London, as he reflects 'that you couldn't take such an odd world seriously, and yet all the time, in fact, he took it with a mortal seriousness.'<sup>103</sup>

The realisation of this overpowering reality of fantastical events is in keeping with the nature of the espionage thriller, as *The Ministry of Fear* inculcates an overbearing sense of suspicion. As Luc Boltanski has described it, in the transition from detective fiction to espionage fiction, suspicion 'is no longer just on the local level, in a certain district or a certain village (...)' Suspicion arises everywhere and at every moment, whether or not there is an attested crime.'<sup>104</sup> Boltanski's figuration is of the progression from detective fiction to espionage fiction, but for Rowe the progression is more jarring still. He hires private detectives, The Orthotex Investigation Bureau, to investigate the conspiracy pursuing him, but Orthotex is simply not equipped to deal with the scale of crime in which Rowe is embroiled; they fail in their task and one of their detectives is murdered. The international conspiracy is vast in its implications, and as a bureau of private detectives, even murder is outside of their usual remit. As the nominal professionals are not equipped for the work, it is not surprising that Rowe falls short. This is emphasised as each chapter of the novel is preceded by a quote from *The Little Duke*, a children's adventure story which Rowe nostalgically purchases at the same fête at which he wins the cake, and these quotes frame the extremity of Rowe's situation against the simplicity of his literary hinterland. His dependence on the simplicity of nostalgia is emphasised by the indication that his preferred adult reading material is two volumes of Dickens, over and over again.

The paradox of Rowe's adolescent morality is that it doesn't account for the complexity of his adult situation. As a mercy killer, Rowe is simplistically a murderer, and as a murderer, frames himself as 'monstrous,' but that murder is also explicated as a product of his upbringing; the act of pity is an extension of the lessons of childhood which are described as 'ineffaceable.'<sup>105</sup> More than

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<sup>103</sup>Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 33.

<sup>104</sup>Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 127.

<sup>105</sup>Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 88.

anything, these childhood lessons are defined by books like *The Little Duke*:

Our heroes are simple: they are brave, they tell the truth, they are good swordsmen and they are never in the long run really defeated. That is why no later books satisfy us like those which were read to us in childhood – for those promised a world of great simplicity of which we knew the rules, but later books are complicated and contradictory with experience;<sup>106</sup>

It takes a trauma which erases the complexity of adulthood to prepare Rowe to act the decisive hero required by the narrative. Like Ambler's debut novel, *The Dark Frontier*, the thriller narrative of *The Ministry of Fear* pivots on the device of amnesia. Suffering from amnesia caused by an explosion, Rowe is freed from the burden of doubt and guilt over the mercy killing of his wife, and concomitantly freed to reinterpret reality and his place in it. In a more pronounced manner even than Greene's other spy thrillers, Rowe's amnesia provides a perfect terrain for an interrogation of the tropes and techniques of the thriller. The baggage of complex emotional history is stripped away and Rowe is left to interpret the world anew through adolescent eyes. As Damon DeCoste notes, 'What Rowe, through the agency of the war, has forgotten, then, is his adult identity, and this forgetting permits a joyous repetition of his own age of innocence.'<sup>107</sup> Consigned to a care facility which is run by a senior figure in the conspiracy which has been pursuing him, he commits to action and resolves to break out, thus reliving the enchantment of childhood notions of adventure: 'He was back in his own childhood, breaking out of dormitory, daring more than he really wanted to dare, proving himself.'<sup>108</sup> By opting for heroism, Rowe becomes more directly involved in the war which reduces the horizon of moral uncertainty and negates the liberal dilemma which attempts to view issues from every possible direction; difficult choices, previously deferred, become urgent. However, in this, while obliterating nuance, which allows his conversion to a man of action, Rowe's amnesia also implicitly aligns him with Hilfe, the leader of the Nazi conspiracy and brother of Anna, Rowe's tentative love interest, who describes the intrigue of murder as 'the Real Thing' and approaches it with a

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<sup>106</sup>Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 89.

<sup>107</sup>Damon Marcel DeCoste, 'Modernism's Shell-Shocked History: Amnesia, Repetition, and the War in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 45.4 (1999), 428–51 (p. 437).

<sup>108</sup>Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 137.

'sense of exhilaration.'<sup>109</sup> The conversion to heroism thus brings with it the risk of transgressing civilised boundaries, providing a dangerously facile solution to what Lee Horsley has described as Greene's preoccupation 'with the unequal contest between fascist violence and an opponent weakened by civilised scruples.'<sup>110</sup>

It is no coincidence, then, that the exploding suitcase which hospitalises Rowe is disguised as a suitcase filled with books as *The Ministry of Fear* demonstrates the shortcomings of each of Rowe's different literary hermeneutic codes. In the first instance, it offers both a demonstration, and critique, of the thriller genre as a technique for understanding the modern world. Realism, the act of facing reality, is insufferably painful, while childhood adventure does not account for a world inhabited by evil, and the melodrama of the modern thriller reduces moral decisions to tokens. None of the interpretations are able to provide a solution to the complex dilemma of pity which haunts Rowe. Gavin Lambert notes that 'Rowe still wonders whether he poisoned his wife out of "mercy to her or to me" and is obsessed by the thought that pity represents the easy way out, selfishness in disguise,'<sup>111</sup> as 'It wasn't only the evil man who did these things. Courage smashes a cathedral, endurance lets a city starve, pity kills...we are trapped and betrayed by our virtues.'<sup>112</sup> LeRoy Panek has stated that 'At the end of the book, [Rowe] grows up for a second time, reacquiring pity and learning how to bear its burden,'<sup>113</sup> but the resolution is not so clear, as Rowe and Anna individually but mutually resolve to live pleasant lies for one another's benefit, and Rowe thus realises that resolution is a fictive illusion, 'He had hoped that wherever Anna was there would be peace; coming up the stairs a second time he knew that there would never be peace again.'<sup>114</sup> However, the novel also recalls Bloch in acknowledging the positive potential of daydreams:

One could laugh at day-dreams, but so long as you had the capacity to day-dream, there was a chance that you might develop some of the qualities of which you dreamed (...) words however emptily repeated can in time form a habit, a kind of unnoticed sediment at the bottom of your mind - until one day to your own surprise you find yourself acting on the belief you thought you didn't

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<sup>109</sup>Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 61.

<sup>110</sup>Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 83.

<sup>111</sup>Lambert, p. 153.

<sup>112</sup>Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 74.

<sup>113</sup>Panek, p. 126.

<sup>114</sup>Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 220.

believe in.<sup>115</sup>

Even as it consistently undermines the utility of genre fiction, the exemplary daydream form, the novel always retains this perspective. While Rowe's transition to heroic action is temporary and takes him dangerously close to sharing a position with his enemies, it still represents a quickening effect in the narrative; it provides thrills in amongst Greene's generic self-reflection. The importance of this transition, then, cannot be denied.

### Conclusion

As we have seen, Greene's thrillers are deeply invested with political questions, even as they do not come to straightforward conclusions to those questions. When George Orwell discussed Greene's politics in a letter to Tosco Fyvel in 1949, he did so by denying any necessary link between Greene's Catholicism and adherence to conservative politics, instead characterising him on a leftist spectrum:

in outlook he is just a mild Left with faint CP leanings (...) If you look at books like *A Gun For Sale*, *England Made Me*, *The Confidential Agent* and others, you will see that there is the usual left-wing scenery. The bad men are millionaires, armaments manufacturers, etc., and the good man is sometimes a Communist.<sup>116</sup>

Orwell's characterisation of "the usual left-wing scenery" is not an unfair one. From Czinner's wavering revolutionary leftism, through Raven's instinctual class-consciousness and Sir Marcus' profiteering villainy, and on to D.'s "economic materialism," Greene's thrillers in the thirties certainly carry a leftist flavour, if nothing else. However, as we have seen,<sup>117</sup> a leftist flavour is not necessarily expressive of a thoroughgoing commitment. Arthur Calder-Marshall, discussing Greene's politics, notes that 'he is as fascinated by communists as he is ignorant of their organization, discipline and aims.'<sup>118</sup> The most straightforward portrayal of the kind of organized Communism to which Calder-Marshall refers comes in *It's a Battlefield*, with its portrayal of an

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<sup>115</sup>Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 43.

<sup>116</sup>George Orwell, 'To Tosco Fyvel', in *George Orwell: A Life in Letters* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), pp. 460–61 (p. 460).

<sup>117</sup>See Chapter 3

<sup>118</sup>Calder Marshall, p. 372.

insubstantial Communist meeting and its unflattering portrayal of Mr. Surrogate, who is not a failure, but is instead a charlatan. Failure is reserved for those like Czinner, who remain committed to their cause, as Baldrige notes, 'Greene portrays all his revolutionaries as failures, though not in a way that discredits the justice of their cause, for in Greeneland it is the hopeless causes that are the most worthy of allegiance.'<sup>119</sup>

In general, the utopian teleologies of organized groups are never plausible in these novels. As *The Confidential Agent* demonstrated most comprehensively, the political horizon of Greene's thrillers precluded the closure of collective eschatologies, even as they diagnosed the shortcomings of the existing system. D. is indelibly self-conscious of the failings and inconsistencies of his cause, while other utopian projects like the Entrentiano language school are sites of suspicion and coercion. Furthermore, *The Ministry of Fear* presents utopian spaces and projects as dangerous ones, potential locations of totalitarian imposition. Thus the nostalgic church fête, the seemingly progressive sanatorium and Hilfe's charity are sites of danger masquerading as sites of peace or progress. For Greene, the entire notion of remaking the world by such projects is itself suspect. For instance, Rowe's foundational act of pity, the mercy killing of his wife, attempts to enact a remaking of a world with less suffering. But his utopian solution is both insufficient and totalitarian; his desire to reduce suffering imposes the new world in which he is a tortured soul, preoccupied by his previous actions.

The other novels are less interested in organizations or official groups. Instead they address politics obliquely, presenting anti-capitalist perspectives without systemisation. As Baldrige notes,

Greene (...) is better at making us aware of injustices than at devising specific programs to eradicate them, and thus much of his social democratic outlook must be inferred from his disparaging depictions of the often quite different political assumptions and enthusiasms of his characters.<sup>120</sup>

In this light, it is clear that the political perspective of these novels is one of

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<sup>119</sup>Baldrige, p. 175.

<sup>120</sup>Baldrige, p. 170.

ambivalence;, of both the impossibility and the necessity of commitment, even as leftist anti-capitalism appears again and again.

Where undeniable elements of leftist perspective arise, they do so from a perception of society's condemnation of its own victims to isolation and exile from the safety of genuine peace. Sharrock has described this condemnation to separation as a result of 'incommunicable pasts and childhoods and by the incomprehensibility of a world without any recognizable total moral pattern,'<sup>121</sup> but this elides the fact that these elements are products of the capitalist society's institutional biases. Coral Musker, Raven and Else are the starkest examples of this. Those with power, equated with those with capital, exercise that power without concern for these powerless victims whose fates are insignificant. The individual is at the mercy of the forces which the powerful control, as Widdowson says,

although his individuals are obscure and abject, and are not themselves the central focus, it is exactly in this that both his liberal-humanism and his realism are revealed: the *real* crime of monopoly capitalism and its "warfare" is the displacement of the individual.<sup>122</sup>

Nevertheless, while the individual is vulnerable and isolated, it is also the most fundamental unit of Greene's political conception. D. especially is forced to make choices and commitments as an individual in what Robert Snyder has described as 'isolation without the luxury of validation by either a secular or transcendent authority.'<sup>123</sup> D.'s inability to commit wholeheartedly to a communal cause illustrates the strong theme running through Greene's thrillers in defence of individualism. More precisely, perhaps, in defence of what Christopher Caudwell described, as noted in a previous chapter, as an 'illusory conception of freedom.'<sup>124</sup> The thrillers also participate in a converse perspective, functioning as a critique of that same individualism. As individuals, Greene's protagonists are free to choose, to express their individualism, but that freedom curses them to disconnection from the idea of mass belonging, and so prevents the very idea of effective collective action. As Adamson notes, 'As the

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<sup>121</sup>Sharrock, p. 72.

<sup>122</sup>Widdowson, Peter, p. 154.

<sup>123</sup>Robert Lance Snyder, *The Art of Indirection in British Espionage Fiction: A Critical Study of Six Novelists* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2011), p. 62.

<sup>124</sup>See above, Chapter 2



characters retreat from one another into their own psychological dilemmas, they lose all belief in their ability to stop the rising brutality and social rot.<sup>125</sup> Rowe realises this problem, noting that his belief in an abstract love for humanity makes him vulnerable to idealism and thus to manipulation by totalising notions. A sign of his growth from this is the further realisation that 'One can't love humanity. One can only love people.'<sup>126</sup>

Greene's powerless figures are suited by nature to the thriller, as powerlessness and isolation create omnipresent danger by definition, which Panek has described as crucial to the genre: 'Pursuit and escape, in fact, the suspense novel itself, rests on the writer finding means of making danger seem omnipresent.'<sup>127</sup> In this context, individual powerlessness is repudiated by recourse to action, but this is only ever a temporary solution, as action is overdetermined by its literary sources. In this, Greene's thrillers dramatise the novel's traditional form as an individualist bourgeois narrative by showcasing individuals isolated in the first place from their society and in the second place from those closest to them. While the high modernist novel pursued a similar end through its employment of stream-of-consciousness techniques, Greene accomplished it by constructing an alienating social world in a realist mode in which experience is always-already mediated by other texts. Catherine Belsey's description of the act of reading a realist text is thus somewhat applicable to Greene's thrillers, which manipulate the traditions of classic realism as an element of their form:

The experience of reading a realist text is ultimately reassuring, however harrowing the events of the story, because the world evoked in the fiction, its patterns of cause and effect, of social relationships and moral values, largely confirm the patterns of the world we seem to know.<sup>128</sup>

However, while participating in this process, Greene's thrillers also work hard to "de-familiarize" the thriller and disrupt this process of final reassurance by drawing attention to their own generic form and to the inadequacy of generic forms in general. Rowe's interpretive framework of adventure and melodrama

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<sup>125</sup>Adamson, p. 25.

<sup>126</sup>Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, p. 184.

<sup>127</sup>Panek, p. 66.

<sup>128</sup>Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 51.

especially makes explicit this inadequacy, but it is also strongly present in D.'s approach to his mission and the effect his melodramatic presence has on those around him. As Chris Hopkins notes, the 'very style and the form of his novels, in the thirties and after, shows a strong sense of the thriller as superficially inauthentic, and yet also the only genre really able to represent the emptiness of the modern world.'<sup>129</sup>

Even as the novels deconstruct their own form, they also recognise the centrality of the thriller, as a representative popular form, within the partial lives of the powerless characters who people the novels. The transformative utopian potential of genre fiction provides hope to these characters as an obverse to their entrapment by generic devices which romanticise danger, poverty, and false hope. They provide models for understanding the world which allow access to romance and make up for the pervasive shortfall of reality. Even though D.'s transition to heroic action is ultimately doomed and is precipitated by his absorption of fictive notions of melodrama, bravery and honour, they are still heroic actions. Similarly, though Else's death is caused by her notions of honour and goodness acquired from lowbrow romance fictions, her fidelity to those notions provide moments of lightness amidst the more general drudgery and impoverishment of her life. These moments, then, emerge from the illusory confirmation of daydreams, and so illustrate the potential of these fictions to provide moments of significance in otherwise insignificant lives.

Greene thus presents the act of reading the genre novel as simultaneously an act of violence on its characters, as well as a survival strategy for those characters, (a survival strategy which is both successful and insufficient). As Calder-Marshall notes, 'Greenlanders are homeless men, pining for domesticity, the kettle on the hob, warmth, security, love or tenderness, an end to all hate and struggle. Yet for a number of reasons this is impossible.'<sup>130</sup> In this, they share much with the Amblerian protagonists discussed above, trapped by their ideological commitment to a system which ensures their isolation and vulnerability. More so than in the case of Ambler's protagonists, who generally have at least a semblance of individual hinterland to which they can return following their survival of an espionage narrative, Greene's characters are more fundamentally adrift. Thus, in recognising their

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<sup>129</sup>Chris Hopkins, *English Fiction in the 1930s: Language, Genre, History* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 131.

<sup>130</sup>Calder Marshall, p. 368.

impossible desire for normality and domesticity, we cannot escape our implication as voyeurs in their suffering and by extension our position in perpetuating their powerlessness. By its nature, the thriller form involves the reader in a consensual narrative progression even while its heroes are buffeted unwillingly by the slings and arrows of fortune, with the promise of some kind of narrative closure for its suffering characters. However we know that for these figures in Greene's thrillers, narrative closure is illusory even on an individual level; as is typical of all positive teleologies in these novels, any teleology of eventual comfort is doomed to failure. As Adamson observes, these novels 'were intensely political in that they recorded the pressure of immediate events on individuals' lives, but nowhere do they suggest a future.'<sup>131</sup> Greene's characters are thus victims of his own political ambivalence and his incapability of imagining a resolution to the contradictions of modernity.

In contradiction with Greene's novels, another espionage novel which, like *The Confidential Agent*, treated the Spanish Civil War, Francis Beeding's *Hell Let Loose*, demonstrates how another narrative in the same genre and with a similar political sympathy to Greene's, produces entirely different, more conventional, effects through its superficial treatment of the same issues which Greene addressed. Beeding's novel similarly recognises the barrage of horror which modernity presents, as it acknowledges that 'the evidence afforded by the daily press [is] that the only possible retreat for a reasonable human being at this moment is the madhouse',<sup>132</sup> and even extends this acknowledgement into a general expression of both existential futility and of questions of patriotism and global politics:

I had a sense of the futility of modern civilisation (...) all but one of us prepared to die as a protest against things as managed by people in authority, and that one exception, myself, the paid agent of a great Empire whose boast it was that she had a larger share of the secret of civilisation than fell to the lot of other nations, but which, when it came to the point, must employ men such as I to use the devices of a gangster to keep it safe and ensure that its citizens might sleep with relative safety in their beds. Obviously something was wrong and just as

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<sup>131</sup>Adamson, p. 26.

<sup>132</sup>Francis Beeding, *Hell Let Loose* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1937), p. 16.

obviously no one had the least idea how to set it right.<sup>133</sup>

However, it cannot embrace the ambivalence that these issues engender in Greene. Instead the novel retreats into the comforting certainties of unreflective genre fiction. Generic tropes go cheerfully unexamined in pursuit of the traditionally satisfying thriller formula, as when its hero, Colonel Granby, somehow fabricates convincing disguises as varied as an elderly peasant woman, a Franciscan friar in a prison and an officer of the Requettes, and as in its simplistic happy resolution. Indeed, in the midst of its expressions of futility and existential angst, it finds a place for straightforward cheerful patriotism, as a foreign spy extols the discreet charm of the English:

The only realists, my friend, are the English. They allow everything its place and value, including their ideals. They adapt themselves more rapidly than any other race to their circumstances. They do not force facts to conform with their theories or their passions; they bring their ideals to reasonable terms with things as they are. They find a place for everything; for their intelligence, though they often pretend to be lacking in that commodity, and for their emotions, though they often pretend to be ashamed of them. They respect tradition and yet are ready to welcome any new thing. They combine a primitive love for country and kind with a sincere belief in the new internationalism.<sup>134</sup>

In the particular light of Greene's thrillers, the contradiction engendered between a recognition of existential futility and stubborn fidelity to unexamined formulae is jarring, but only in that particular light. Beeding's novel is a perfectly fine espionage novel, expressive of the genre and approaching Todorov's characterisation of a "masterpiece of popular literature". It partakes of novel generic devices evolved in the Ambler-Greene story without wholeheartedly embracing the position of radical rupture from the traditional form represented by those works. Indeed, *Hell Let Loose* is an example of the vast unstudied ranks of these fictions which demand further examination and commensurate preservation. However, at the points where it refuses to take the radical step of undermining its own form, it is also a novel which emphasises the

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<sup>133</sup>Beeding, *Hell Let Loose*, p. 21.

<sup>134</sup>Beeding, *Hell Let Loose*, p. 259.

thoroughgoing novelty of Greene's contributions to the form, and indicating the fruitlessness of the attempts to incorporate Greene's thrillers into pre-existing categories which introduced this chapter. These works occupy too many simultaneous positions to be reduced (or elevated) to a common position with other works; they are a thing unto themselves, perhaps positioning them within Todorov's version of "masterpieces", but not, in this unnecessary legitimization, leaving behind the category of popular literature.

## Conclusion

In 1936, *The Observer* noted that 'it would, as any constant reader will admit, require the secret of sheer genius to make in these late days, the theft of a secret cypher, key to an internationally important secret, other than dull.'<sup>1</sup> Three years later, after the outbreak of war, the same newspaper drew attention to a further proliferation of spy stories: 'One might have expected a slump in spy stories in war time, but there are no signs of one, rather the reverse. Perhaps there is a homeopathic principle at work.'<sup>2</sup> Such a change can be observed in the turning of authors of detective stories from their more usual pedestrian subject matter to the creation of spy stories. Anthony Boucher has observed that 'With the approaching rumbles of World War II, a number of admirable writers turned for the first time to chronicling international intrigue. Margery Allingham, Nicholas Blake, Helen McCloy, Ngaio Marsh and many others, most notably Michael Innes, saved the free world from fascism in skilfully written entertainments.'<sup>3</sup>

The *Times Literary Supplement*, in a review of a group of thrillers published after the outbreak of war, theorised that the form was more appropriate to life during the blitz than its stable-mate, the detective story: 'Thrillers, speedy and full of incident, take the mind more off barrage and bomb perhaps than more leisurely problems in detection.'<sup>4</sup> In 1945, Howard Haycraft observed that the conditions of the blitz had led to "raid" libraries at underground stations, 'to supply, by popular demand, detective stories and nothing else (...) As the chosen escapist literature of modern times in general and wartime in particular,<sup>5</sup> but as is often the case, Haycraft's assertion was an example of linguistic slipperiness as play, as he defined the field of "the whodunit" 'in its widest and commonly accepted generic sense to include all related tales of mystery and crime,'<sup>6</sup> which included the espionage novel.

Offered as throwaway remarks on the increase in the popularity of the thriller, these comments are yet little removed from the reductive, instrumental analyses of genre fiction discussed in Chapter 2. The *TLS*, while praising the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Observer*, 1 March 1936, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Richardson, 'The Crime Ration', *The Observer*, 19 November 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Boucher, 'There's a Spy Between the Covers', *New York Times*, 7 June 1964, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 November 1940, p. 605.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Haycraft, *New York Times*, 12 August 1945, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Haycraft, p. 7.

utility of the thriller in its ability to distract from “barrage and bomb”, nevertheless relied upon that utility as an appropriate metric by which to attribute value to the form. The thriller is thus reduced to a commodity; an object of consumption in which each individual example is exchangeable with any other. By extension, as a commodity, the increase in production effected by the outbreak of war is framed within the same structure as an increase in the production of gas masks or blackout blinds, one of supply and demand. As the demand for distraction is increased, so the supply of distracting literature must increase in lock-step.

Such a focus on the quantity of publication, and of meeting a direct commercial need, elides a more considered appreciation of the connection between these publications and a specific war mentality. John Lehmann noted this connection, suggesting that the crime novel, of whichever variety, had come to present ‘the truest picture of our home, our inescapable environment.’<sup>7</sup> In the intervening period, this perception has been reaffirmed by analysts of the genre such as Ralph Harper:

Thriller literature is crisis literature, and has arisen in the same century as crisis theology and existential philosophy, as a response to the crises of our civilization. What readers find in these books is not abstract analyses either of turmoil or of mores, but a pretense at firsthand on-the-scene experiencing of the heart of the matter.<sup>8</sup>

Crisis, or near-crisis, was one of the predominant mode of the twentieth century, and dividing the century into periods of conflict and respite is a fool’s errand. Without explicit clarification, terms such as “pre-war”, “post-war” and “inter-war” are rendered imprecise by the ubiquity of war, whether hot or cold, and speak more of emphasis and perspective than of objective truth. We can say with some certainty that the espionage novel had its infancy as a pre-war form, anticipating “the war to end all wars”, and reached maturity, in terms of its greatest diversity and prominence in the Cold War world; an ontologically uncertain environment of overlapping statuses; pre-war, post-war and inter-war all at once. This Cold War world was the ultimate realization of Boltanski’s

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Victoria Stewart, *Narratives of Memory: British Writing of the 1940s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Harper, *The World of the Thriller* (Cleveland, Ohio: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969), p. 46.

assertion that 'Ordinary citizens and even sometimes those responsible for the state, or at least most of them, believe naively that the state is at peace and act accordingly - whereas in fact the state has never ceased to be at war.'<sup>9</sup> Indeed, through this context, espionage became one of the primary heuristics of postmodernity, and espionage culture became one of the primary modes of expression of the period, in all cultural forms. However, even before this period of cultural significance, the Ambler-Greene story had participated in dismantling the notion that the espionage thriller was a form of pure utility, 'designed to be read in the face of lassitude and nervous fatigue.'<sup>10</sup> A review in *The Observer* of *The Confidential Agent* identified this characteristic:

absorbing as this latest thriller is and though it may help us to forget momentarily our individual worries, it hardly provides us with a complete distraction, because its sinister atmosphere, so skilfully conveyed, is the very atmosphere in which we ourselves are already involved. Being by Mr Greene, *The Confidential Agent* is, of course, a thriller with a difference, fresh in invention and exceptionally well written.<sup>11</sup>

This review indicates a crucial element of the Ambler-Greene story which I have attempted to emphasise in this thesis. These are novels, I have suggested, which attempt ongoing syntheses of apparently paradoxical elements in pursuit of the production of mass cultural texts which are politically and culturally complex, though primarily progressive, combining readability with a literary sensibility, and which do so in the dominant, sinister, mode of our modern age. In this, they fulfil R. Gordon Kelly's description of modernity:

Under the conditions of modernity, the more or less unified "life-world" of the premodern individual gives way to the experience of plural life-worlds that resist unification, and therefore meaningful integration.<sup>12</sup>

The sinister mode is an expression of this overwhelming and irreconcilable plurality engendered by modernity. Fundamentally, then, these texts are

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<sup>9</sup> Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Wilfrid Gibson, 'Four New Novels', *The Observer*, 6 October 1939, p. 7 (p. 3).

<sup>12</sup> R. Gordon Kelly, *Mystery Fiction and Modern Life* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 25.



involved in what Williams and Matthews have described as

a troubled but symptomatic transitional phase between modernist and postmodernist writing, art and politics, a complex mutation that defined itself within, and in some ways against, the wider background of popular writing and mass culture of the time.<sup>13</sup>

As such, they are products of what Kristin Bluemel has labelled “intermodernism”, and which Nick Hubble describes as referring ‘to a period between 1930 and 1950 and a style between modernism and postmodernism, it also signifies a cultural politics both part of and not part of modernism.’<sup>14</sup>

This thesis has shown that as products of this in-between culture, the Ambler-Greene story occupies insistently “in between” positions meaning that their dominant mode is one of dissonance. Accordingly, these works begin from a fundamental undertaking to fulfil Boltanski’s description of espionage fiction in which ‘the hero turns out to be two beings in one, both hunter and hunted,’<sup>15</sup> and infuse their entire being with elements which are “two beings in one”. In their evolutionary development in response to the extreme idiosyncratic pressures of their period of emergence, they produce a form which always occupies multiple positions: progressive/regressive, formulaic/innovative, popular/elite. In this light I have offered readings of the products of that evolutionary development, in the light of their status as both generic constructions and as specifically located texts engaged in dialogue with the complexities of politics. Thus it has attempted to consider the internal contradictions manifest in these texts by expression of the paradoxes of their ideological dissonance. They long for utopian change but cannot accept their belief in it, they recognise that the *status quo* is unsatisfactory, but nevertheless romanticise and crave it. The thesis shows that the characters in these stories are thus victims of what Tony Bennett has called ‘those myths through which individuals are reconciled to their given social positions by falsely representing to them those positions and the relationships between them as if they formed a

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<sup>13</sup>‘Introduction’, in *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, ed. by Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 1–4 (p. 1).

<sup>14</sup>Nick Hubble, ‘Imagism, Realism, Surrealism: Middlebrow Transformations in the Mass-Observation Project’, in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960*, ed. by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 202–17 (p. 211).

<sup>15</sup>Boltanski, p. 122.

part of some inherently significant, intrinsically coherent plan or process,<sup>16</sup> but are deeply invested in furthering those myths.

As Gill Plain reminds us, 'Within the genre of crime fiction there rages a struggle for canonical legitimacy every bit as fierce as those conducted in the academic mainstream,'<sup>17</sup> and the focus on Ambler and Greene in this thesis plainly contributes to this process even as I seek to oppose it. These may be somewhat marginal texts, but they are not entirely neglected. However, the identification of these works is intended to open up scholarship on the espionage novel in this period, not to act as a closure. Undoubtedly, the immediate impact of the changes enacted by these works is requiring of much further study. Authors such as Helen MacInnes very quickly produced works, such as *Assignment in Brittany*,<sup>18</sup> which operate within the terrain by the novels in this study. Additionally, John Mair's novel *Never Come Back*,<sup>19</sup> which was published during the Second World War, expands on some of the novel devices introduced by Ambler and Greene and produces, in its dramatically anti-heroic protagonist, further radical intertextual deconstruction of the form. It certainly demands further study than it has received. Similarly, other authors, such as Stevie Smith, in *Over the Frontier*<sup>20</sup>, chose to emphasise other aspects of the form. In this case, that choice was towards a kind of heightened surrealism, another novel device in the context of this genre which, though it has received some attention, is worthy of further attention. Hopefully, this thesis establishes a foundation from which fresh approaches to these, as well as other as yet unstudied works.

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<sup>16</sup>Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 116.

<sup>17</sup>Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup>Helen MacInnes, *Assignment in Brittany* (London: Titan, 2012).

<sup>19</sup>John Mair, *Never Come Back* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>20</sup>Stevie Smith, *Over the Frontier* (London: Virago, 1980).

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